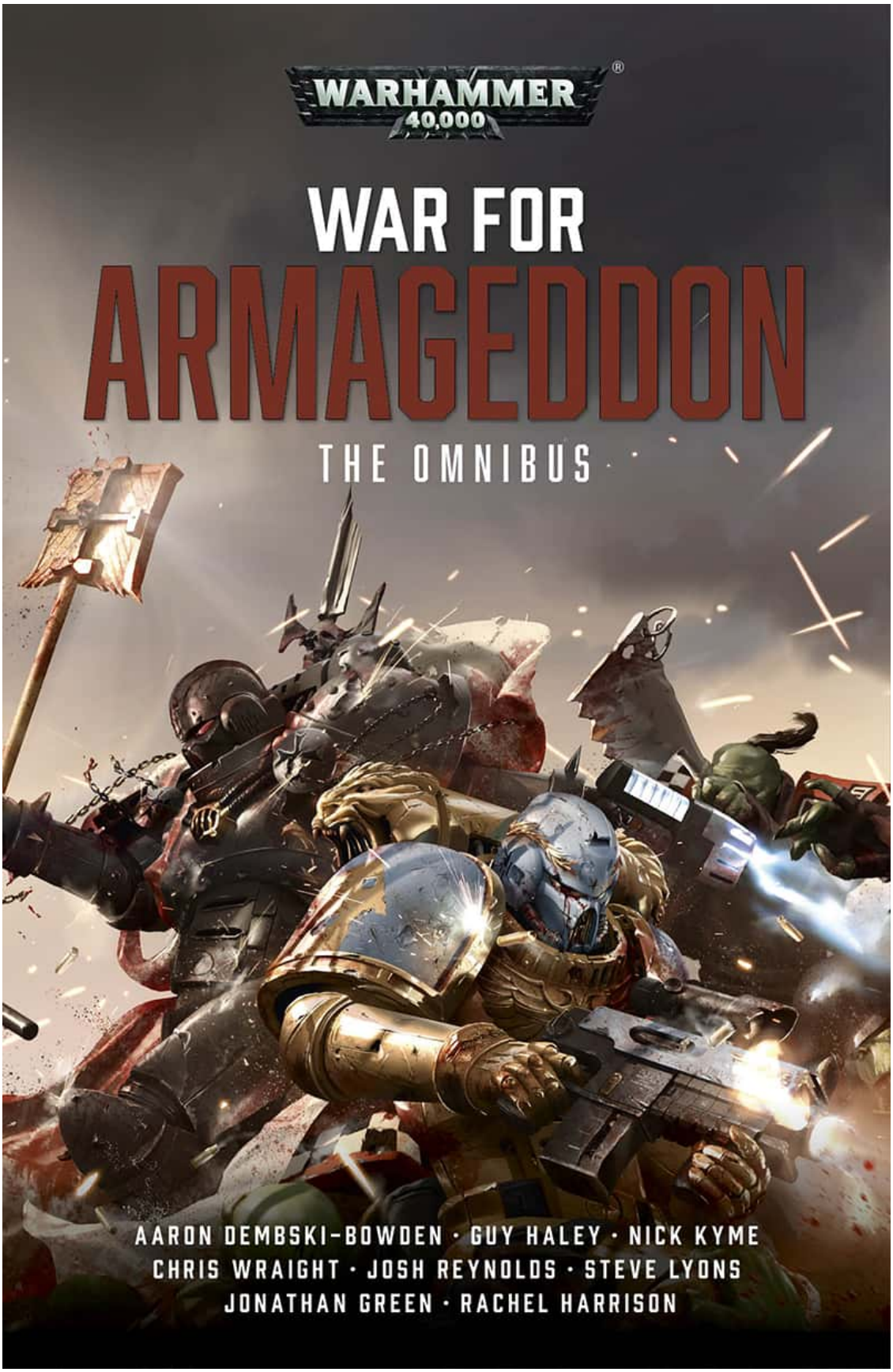
WARHAMMER 40,000

WAR FOR ARMAGEDDON

THE OMNIBUS

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN · GUY HALEY · NICK KYME
CHRIS WRAIGHT · JOSH REYNOLDS · STEVE LYONS
JONATHAN GREEN · RACHEL HARRISON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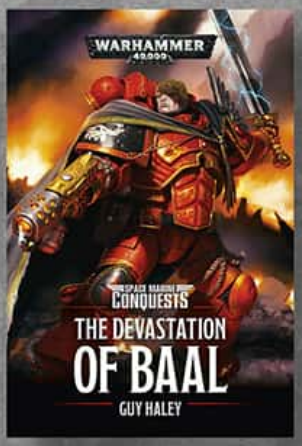

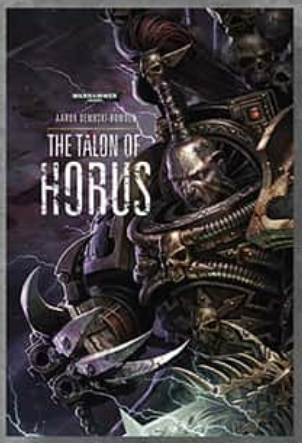

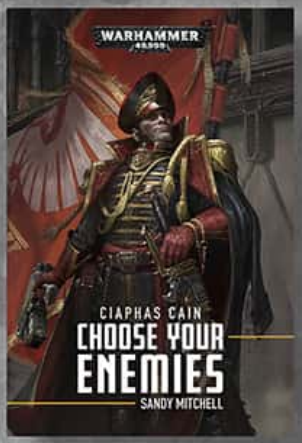

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WAR FOR ARMAGEDDON

THE OMNIBUS

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of

thirsting gods.

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HELSREACH

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

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PART ONE

THE EXILED KNIGHT

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PROLOGUE

KNIGHT OF THE INNER CIRCLE

I will die on this world.

I cannot tell where this conviction comes from. Whatever birthed it is a mystery to me, and yet the thought clings like a virus, blooming behind my eyes and taking deep root within my mind. It almost feels real enough to spread corruption to the rest of my body, like a true sickness.

It will happen soon, within the coming nights of blood and fire. I will draw my last breath, and when my brothers return to the stars, my ashes will be scattered over the priceless earth of this accursed world.

Armageddon.

Even the name twists my blood until burning oil beats through my veins. I feel anger now, hot and heavy, flowing through my heart and filtering into my limbs like boiling poison.

When the sensation – and it is a physical sensation – reaches my fingertips, my hands curl into fists. I do not make them adopt this shape, it simply happens. Fury is as natural to me as breathing. I neither fear nor resent its influence on my actions.

I am strong, born only to slay for the Emperor and the Imperium. I am pure, wearing the blackest of the black, trained to serve as a spiritual guide as well as a warleader. I am wrath incarnate, living only to kill until finally killed.

I am a weapon in the Eternal Crusade to forge humanity's mastership of the stars.

Yet strength, purity and wrath will not be enough. I will die on this world. I will die on Armageddon.

Soon, my brothers will ask me to consecrate the war that will be my death.

The thought plagues me not because I fear death, but because a futile death is anathema to me.

But this is no night to think such things. My lords, masters and brothers-have gathered to honour me.

I am not sure I deserve this, but as with my sick sense of foreboding, this is a thought I keep to myself. I wear the black, and glare from behind the skulled visage of the immortal Emperor. It is not for one such as I to show doubt, to show weakness, to show even the whispering edges of blasphemy.

In the holiest chamber of our ancient flagship, I lower myself to one knee and bow my head, because this is what is asked of me. The time has come after a century and a half, and I wish it had not.

My mentor – the warrior who was my brother, father, teacher and master – is dead. After one hundred and sixty-six years of his guidance, I am on the edge of inheriting his mantle.

These are my thoughts as I kneel before my commanders, this bleak mesh of my master's death and my own yet to come. This is the blackness that festers unspoken.

At last, unaware of my secret torments, the High Marshal speaks my name.

'Grimaldus,' High Marshal Helbrecht intoned. His voice was a guttural rumble, rendered harsh from yelling orders and battle cries in a hundred wars on a hundred worlds.

Grimaldus did not raise his head. The knight closed his disquietingly gentle eyes, as if this gesture could seal the doubts within his skull.

'Yes, my liege.'

'We have brought you here to honour you, just as you have honoured us for so many years.'

Grimaldus said nothing, sensing it was not his time to speak. He knew why they were honouring him now, of course, and the knowledge was bitter. Mordred – Grimaldus's mentor, a Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade – was dead.

After the ritual, Grimaldus would take his place.

It was an honour he had waited one hundred and sixty-six years to receive.

A century and a half of wrath, courage and pain since the Battle of Fire and Blood, when he drew the eye of the revered Mordred – who was

already ancient but unbowed, and who saw within the young Grimaldus a burning core of potential.

A century and a half since he was inducted into the lowest ranks of the Chaplain brotherhood, rising through the tiers in his master's shadow, knowing that he was being forged in war to replace his ageing guardian.

Over a century and a half of believing he would not deserve the title when it finally rested upon his shoulders.

Now the time had come, and his conviction had not changed.

'We have summoned you,' Helbrecht said, 'to be judged.'

'I have answered the summons,' Grimaldus said in the silence of the Reclusiam. 'I submit myself before your judgement, my liege.'

Helbrecht wore no armour, but his bulk was barely diminished. Clad in layered robes of bone-white and bearing his personal black heraldry, the High Marshal stood in the Temple of Dorn, his hands clutching an ornate helm with all due respect.

'Mordred is dead,' Helbrecht's voice was a deep murmur. 'Slain by the archenemy. You, Grimaldus, have lost a master. We have all of us lost a brother.'

The Temple of Dorn, a museum, a Reclusiam, a sanctuary of hanging banners from ten thousand years of crusading, briefly came alive as the knights in the shadows intoned their agreement with their liege lord's words.

Silence returned, and Grimaldus kept his gaze on the floor.

'We mourn his loss,' the High Marshal said, 'but honour his wisdom in this, his final order.'

It comes to this. Grimaldus tensed. *Show no weakness. Show no doubt.*

'Grimaldus, warrior-priest of the Eternal Crusade. It was the belief of Reclusiarch Mordred that upon his death, you would be worthiest of our Brother-Chaplains to stand in his stead. His final decree before the returning of his gene-seed to the Chapter was that you, of all your brethren, would be the one to rise to the rank of Reclusiarch.'

Grimaldus opened his eyes and licked lips that had suddenly turned dry. Slowly he raised his head, facing the High Marshal, seeing Mordred's helm – a grinning steel skull – in the commander's scarred hands.

'Grimaldus,' Helbrecht spoke again, no hint of emotion colouring his voice. 'You are a veteran in your own right, and once stood as the youngest

Sword Brother in the history of the Black Templars. As a Chaplain, your life has been without cowardice or shame, your ferocity and faith without equal. It is my belief, not merely the wish of your fallen master, that you should take the honour we offer you now.'

Grimaldus nodded, but uttered no words. His eyes, so deceptively soft in their gaze, did not waver from their stare. The helm's slanted eye lenses were the rich, deep red of arterial blood. The death mask was utterly familiar to him – the face of his master when the knights went to war, making it the face of his master for most of his life.

Its skullish visage smiled.

'Rise, if you would refuse this honour,' Helbrecht finished. 'Rise and walk from this sacred chamber, if you wish no place in the hierarchy of our most noble Chapter.'

He tells me to rise if I want to turn my back on the great honour being offered to me. Leave if I wish no place among the commanders of the Eternal Crusade.

I don't move. Despite my doubts, my muscles remain locked. The steel mask sneers, a dark leer that is soothing for its brutal familiarity. From beyond the grave, Mordred grins at me.

He believed I was worthy of this. That is all that matters. I had never known him to be wrong.

I feel the edge of a smile creeping across my own lips. It will not fade, no matter how I try to quell it. As I kneel in this hallowed hall, I know I'm smiling, but it's a private moment despite the dozens of fellow warriors watching from the banner-lined walls.

Perhaps they mistake my smile for confidence?

I will never ask, because I do not care.

Helbrecht approaches at last, and with the silken rasp of steel stroking steel, he draws the holiest blade in the Imperium of Man.

The sword was as ancient as human relics could be, given form and purpose in the forges of Terra after the great Heresy. In those nights of saga and legend, it was carried into battle by Sigismund, the first Emperor's Champion, favoured son of the primarch Rogal Dorn.

The blade itself, as long as a mortal man is tall, was wrought from the

broken remains of Lord Dorn's own sword. In this temple, where the Chapter's greatest artefacts are kept in reverently maintained stasis fields to ward off the corrosive touch of time, the High Marshal held the most sacred treasure in the Black Templars armoury.

'You will have your own rituals within the Chaplain brotherhood,' Helbrecht said, his voice solemn with respect. 'For now, I recognise you as the inheritor to your master's mantle.'

The blade's silver tip lowered, pointing directly at Grimaldus's throat. 'You have waged war at my side for two hundred years, Grimaldus. Will you stand at my side as Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade?'

'Yes, my liege.'

Helbrecht nodded, sheathing the blade. Grimaldus tensed again, turning his head and baring his cheek.

With the force of a hammer, the back of Helbrecht's fist crashed into the Chaplain's jaw. Grimaldus grunted, tasting the coppery vitality of his own blood – his primarch's blood – and he grinned up at his commander through blood-pinked teeth. Helbrecht spoke again.

'I dub thee Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade. You are now a leader of our blessed Chapter.' The High Marshal raised his hand, showing the flecks of Grimaldus's blood marking his curled fingers. 'As a knight of the inner circle, let that be the last blow you receive unanswered.'

Grimaldus nodded, unclenching his jaw, calming his hearts and fighting the sudden flood of his killing urge. Even expecting the ritual strike, his instincts cried at him to respond in kind.

'It… will be so, my liege.'

'As it should be,' said Helbrecht. 'Rise, Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade.'

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CHAPTER I

ARRIVAL

For some hours after his ritual entrance into the highest echelons of the Chapter, Grimaldus stood alone in the Temple of Dorn.

Without a breeze to breathe life into the austere chamber, the great banners hung unmoving, some faded with the years, others brightly woven, still others even bearing dried bloodstains. Grimaldus looked upon the heraldry of his brothers' crusades.

Lastrati, piles of skulls and burning braziers depicting the war of attrition on the surface of that accursed heretic world…

Apostasy, showing the aquila chained to the globe, when the Templars were recalled to Holy Terra for the first time in thousands of years, to shed the blood of the false High Lord Vandire…

And on into the more recent wars in which Grimaldus himself had played a part – *Vinculus*, with the sword impaling a daemon, where the knights had crashed against the tainted followers of the archenemy in the great Battle of Fire and Blood – when Grimaldus himself had been taken from the ranks of the Sword Brethren and begun his gruelling rise through the tiers of the Chaplain brotherhood.

Dozens of banners hung in the still air, descending from the ornately carved ceiling, telling the tales of the glories won and the lives lost in each single facet of the Eternal Crusade.

The only noise except for Grimaldus's own breathing was the crackling hum of stasis fields enclosing Templars relics. Grimaldus passed one, a blurry field of smoky blue force revealing through its milky surface a bolter that had once belonged to Castellan Duron two thousand years before. The

kill-markings scratched into the firearm’s surface, etched in the tiniest Gothic lettering, covered the entire weapon like holy scripture.

Grimaldus stood by the plinth displaying the bolter for some time, his fingers itching to enter the release code on the keypad built into the shield’s column. Such secrets were the purview of the Chaplain brotherhood that maintained this shrine, and even before he had risen to his current rank, Grimaldus had honoured the machine-spirits of the chamber’s relics through ritual blessings and reconsecrations.

There was great succour in bearing the weapons of champions, even if only to cleanse and purify them after a warp jump.

Only one of the plinths – and in the Temple of Dorn, there were over a hundred occupied displays – bore what Grimaldus had come for. He stood before the short column, reading the silver plaque beneath the pulsing stasis shield.

MORDRED
RECLUSIARCH
‘WE ARE JUDGED IN LIFE FOR THE EVIL WE DESTROY.’

Beneath the words was a keypad, each key bearing a Gothic sigil in gold leaf. Grimaldus entered the nineteen-digit code for this specific column, and the stasis field powered down with a grinding of ancient engines inside the stone plinth.

Upon the flat surface of the white stone column, a weapon rested, deactivated and silent, freed of the blue illumination that had protected it.

Without any ceremony at all, Grimaldus clutched the maul’s haft and raised it in his sure grip. The head was a hammer of holy gold and blessed adamantium fashioned into the shape of eagle wings over a stylised Templar cross. The haft was darkened metal as long as the knight’s own arm.

The weapon’s ornate head caught the dim glow from the lume-globes ensconced in the walls, and was painted briefly in flashes of reflected light as he turned it in his hands.

The warrior-priest stood like this for some time.

‘Brother,’ came a voice from behind. Grimaldus turned, instinct bringing the weapon to bear.

Despite never holding the relic before, his scarred fingertips found the activation rune along its handle before his heart could even beat once. The eagle-winged hammerhead flared with threatening brightness, serpents of hissing electricity flickering over the gold and silver metal.

The figure smiled to be revealed in such stark illumination. In a face pockmarked and crevassed by decades of battle, Grimaldus saw the amusement in the younger knight's pale eyes.

'Reclusiarch,' the figure inclined his head in greeting.

'Artarion.'

'We draw near to our destination. Estimates put translation back into realspace within the hour. I took the liberty of readying the squad for planetfall.'

Artarion's grin, much like Artarion himself, was ugly to look upon. In contrast, Grimaldus finally returned the smile, but as with his eyes there was an unsuspected gentleness in the expression.

'This world will burn,' the warrior-priest said, not even a shadow of doubt creeping into his voice.

'It will not be the first.' Artarion's scratched lips parted to reveal steel teeth – implanted replacements due to a sniper shot fifteen years before. The rifle round had taken him in the side of the face, shattering his jaw. The mess of scar tissue webbing the flesh around the left side of his lips added to the thin, sneering image he projected when his helm was removed. 'It will not be the first,' he said again, 'nor the last.'

'Have you seen the projections? The fleet auguries, the number of vessels in the local systems already, the reports of those yet to arrive?'

'I lost interest when the numbers became too high for me to count on my fingers.' Artarion snorted at his own weak jest. 'We will fight and win, or fight and die. All that ever changes is the colour of the sky we fight under, and the shade of the blood on our blades.'

Grimaldus lowered the crozius hammer, as if only then realising he still held it at the ready. A rich darkness settled over their sight as the relic's crackling illumination faded. In the wake of the brightness, the sharp scent of ozone – that strange freshness after a storm – filled the air. The power cells within the maul's haft whined as they reluctantly cooled down. The weapon's spirit hungered for war.

'You speak with a soldier's heart, but you are wrong to be so dismissive.

This campaign… This has the weight of history about it. It would be the gravest of errors to consider this merely another conflict to add to the honour rolls.'

The softness had left Grimaldus's voice now. When he spoke, it was with the bitter passion Artarion was all too familiar with, fierce and thick with anticipation – the growled challenge of a caged animal. 'The surface of this world will burn until all of mankind's great achievements upon it are naught but ash and memory.'

'I have never heard you claim we would lose before, brother.'

Grimaldus shook his head, his voice still low and fevered. 'The planet will burn regardless of our triumph or defeat. I speak of the coming crusade's underpinning truth.'

'You are so certain?'

'I feel it in my blood. Win or lose,' the Chaplain said, 'come the final day on Armageddon, those of us that still stand will realise no war has ever cost us so dearly.'

'Have you shared these concerns with the High Marshal?' Artarion scratched the back of his neck, his fingertips soothing the itching skin around a spinal socket.

Grimaldus chuckled, momentarily blindsided by his brother's naivety.

'You think he needs me to tell him?'

Few ships in the Imperium of Man matched the lethal grandeur of *The Eternal Crusader.*

Some ships sailed the heavens like the seaborne vessels of ancient Terra, journeying between the stars with solemnity and a measured grace. *The Eternal Crusader* was not one of these. Like a spear hurled into the void by the hand of Rogal Dorn himself, the flagship of the Templars had been slicing through space for ten thousand years of war. Its engines raged, streaming plasma contrails in their wake as they powered the vessel from world to world in echo of the Emperor's Great Crusade.

And the *Crusader* was not alone.

At her back, the capital vessels *Night's Vigil* and *Majesty* burned their engines hard, striving to keep pace and fall into a lance formation with their flagship. In the wake of these heavy cruisers – a battle-barge and smaller strike cruiser respectively – a wing of support frigates formed the rest of the

lance. Seven in total, each of these faster interceptor vessels powered forward with less of a struggle to maintain formation with the *Crusader.*

The ship burst back into reality, trailing discoloured warp-smog from its protesting Geller field, the brilliance of its plasma drives flaring with gaseous leakage that misted around the void shields of the vessels which slammed back into realspace just behind.

Ahead of them lay an ashen globe, darkened by unclean cloud cover, strangely at peace despite the turmoil surrounding it.

If one were to look into the void around the bitter, punished world of Armageddon, one would see a thriving subsector of Imperial space where even the most prosperous hive planets bore more than their fair share of slowly-healing wounds.

It was a region of space where the worlds themselves were scarred. War, and the fear of another colossal sector-wide conflict, hung over the trillions of loyal Imperial souls like the threat of a storm forever on the edge of breaking.

It was always said by some that the Imperium of Man was dying. These heretical voices spoke of mankind's endless wars against its manifold foes, and decreed that humanity's ultimate fate was being decided in the fires of a million, million battlefields across the countless stars within the God-Emperor's grip.

Nowhere were the words of these seers and prophets more evident than the ravaged – yet rebuilt – Armageddon subsector, named for its greatest world, a world responsible for production and consumption on an immense and unmatched level.

Armageddon itself stood as a bastion of Imperial strength, churning out regiments of tanks from manufactories that never ceased activity by day or night. Millions of men and women wore the ochre armour of Armageddon's Steel Legions, their features hidden behind the traditional respirator masks of this honoured and renowned division of the Imperial Guard.

The hives of this defiant planet reached into the pollution-rich cloud cover that wreathed the world in perpetual twilight. No wildlife howled on Armageddon. No beasts stalked their prey outside the ever-growing hive-cities. The call of the wild was the rattle and clank of ten thousand ammunition manufactories that never halted production. The stalking of animals was the grinding of tank treads across the world's rockcrete

surfaces, awaiting transport into the sky to serve in a hundred and more distant conflicts.

It was a world devoted to war in every way imaginable, made bitter by the scars of the past, soured by the wounds gouged into its face by humanity's enemies. Armageddon always rebuilt after each devastation, but it was never permitted to forget.

The first and foremost reminder of the last war, the almighty Second War that saw billions dead, was a deep space installation named for one of the Emperor's Angels of Death.

Dante, they called it.

It was from there that the mortals of Armageddon stared into the blackness of space, watching, waiting, praying that nothing stared back.

For fifty-seven years, those prayers had been answered.

But no longer. Imperial tacticians already had reliable figures from early engagements that confirmed the greenskin fleet bearing down on Armageddon as the largest xenos invasion force in the history of the segmentum. As the alien fleets closed around the system, Imperial reinforcements raced to break the blockaded sectors and land their troops on Armageddon before the invasion fleet arrived in the heavens above the doomed world.

A battle-barge of no standard design, the *Crusader* was a princely fortress-monastery, charcoal-black and bristling with gothic cathedral spires like a beast's spines along its back. Weapons capable of pounding cities into dust – the claws of this night-stalking predator – aimed into the void. Along the ship's length and clustered across its prow, hundreds of weapons batteries and lance cannons stood with mouths open to the silent darkness of space.

Aboard the ship, a thousand warriors cast off the shackles of training, preparation and meditation. At last, after weeks of passage through the Sea of Souls, Armageddon, beating heart-world of the subsector, was finally in sight.

My brothers' names are Artarion, Priamus, Cador, Nerovar and Bastilan.

These are the knights that have waged war beside me for decades.

I watch them, each in turn, as we make ready for planetfall. Our arming chamber is a cell devoid of decoration, bare of sentiment, alive now with

the methodical movements of dead-minded servitors machining our armour into place. The chamber is thick with the scholarly scent of fresh vellum from our armour scrolls, coppery oils from our ritually-cleansed weapons, and the ever-present cloying salty reek of sweating servitors.

I flex my arm, feeling my war-plate's false muscles of cable and fibre buzz with smooth vibration at the cycle of motion. Papyrus scrolls are draped over the angles of my armour, their delicate runic lettering listing the details of battles I could never forget. This paper, of good quality by Imperial standards, is manufactured on board the *Crusader* by serfs who pass the technique down generation to generation. Every role on the ship is vital. Every duty has its own honour.

My tabard, the white of sun-bleached bone, offers a stark contrast to the blacker than black plate beneath. The heraldic cross stands proud on my chest, where Astartes of lesser Chapters wear the Emperor's aquila. We do not wear His symbol. We *are* His symbol.

My fingers twitch as my gauntlet locks into place. That was not intentional – a nerve-spasm, a pain response. An invasive but familiar coldness settles over my forearm as my gauntlet's neural linkage spike sinks into my wrist to bond with the bones and true muscles there.

I make a fist with my hand armoured in black ceramite, then release it. Each finger flexes in turn, as if pulling a trigger. Satisfied, its dead eyes flashing with an acknowledgement of a job complete, an arming servitor moves away to bring my second gauntlet.

My brothers go through the same rituals of checking and rechecking. A curious sense of unease descends upon me, but I refuse to give it voice. I watch them now because I believe this is the last time we will go through this ritual together.

I will not be the only one to die upon Armageddon.

Artarion, Priamus, Cador, Nerovar and Bastilan. We are the knights of Squad Grimaldus.

Within his veins, Cador carries the blessed blood of Rogal Dorn with what seems like weary honour. His face is shattered and his body tormented – now half-bionic due to untreatable wounds – but he remains defiant, even indefatigable. He is older than I, older by far. His decades within the Sword Brethren are behind him now; he was released with all honour when his advancing age and increasing bionics left him less than the exemplar he had

been before.

Priamus is the rising sun to Cador's dusk. He is aware of his skills in the unsubtle and undignified way of many young warriors. Without even the ghost of humility, his roars of triumph on the battlefield sound like cries for attention, a braggart's declarations. A blademaster, he calls himself. Yet he is not mistaken.

Artarion is… Artarion. My shadow, just as I am his. It is rare among our number for any knight to lay aside personal glory, yet Artarion is the one who carries my banner into battle. He has joked more times than I care to remember that he does so only to provide the enemy with a target lock on my location. For all his great courage, he is not a man blessed with a skilful sense of humour. The mangling wound that fouled his face was a sniper shot meant for me. I carry that knowledge with me each time we go to war.

Nerovar is the newest among us. He holds the dubious honour of being the only knight I chose to stand with me, while all others were appointed to fight by my side. The squad required the presence of an Apothecary. In the trials, only Nerovar impressed the rest of us with his quiet endurance. He labours now over his arm-mounted narthecium, blue eyes narrowed as he tests the flickering snap of surgical blades and cutting lasers. A sickening *clack!* sounds as he fires his reductor. The giver of merciful death, the extractor of gene-seed – its impaling component snaps from its housing, then retracts with sinister slowness.

Bastilan is last. Bastilan, always the best and least of us all. A leader but not a commander – an inspiring presence, but not a strategist – forever a sergeant, never fated to rise as a castellan or marshal. He has always said his role as such is all he desires. I pray he speaks the truth, for if he is deceiving us, he hides the lie well behind his dark eyes.

He is the one who speaks to me now. What he says chills my blood.

'I have heard from Geraint and Lograine of the Sword Brethren,' he chooses his words carefully, 'that there is talk of the High Marshal nominating you to lead a crusade.'

And for a moment, everyone stops moving.

The skies over Armageddon were rich and thick with a sick, greyish-yellow cast. Sulphurous cloud cover was nothing new to the population, with their hive walls treated and shielded against the storm season's downpours of

acid rain.

Around each hive-city across the planet's surface, vast landing fields were cleared, either hurriedly paved with rockcrete or simply ground flat under the treads of hundreds of landscaper trucks. Around Hades Hive, rain scythed down onto the cleared areas and sparked off the dense heat-shimmer of the city's protective void shields. Across the world, the heavens were in turmoil, weather patterns ravaged by the atmospheric disturbance caused by countless ships breaking cloud cover every day.

Yet at Hades Hive, the storms were especially fierce. Hundreds of troop carriers, their paint already melted to reveal bare, dull metal in places, endured the rainfall as they rested on the landing fields. Some were disgorging columns of men into the hastily-erected campsites that were spreading across the wastelands between the hives, while others sat in silence, awaiting clearance to return to orbit.

Hades itself was little more than industrial scar tissue blighting Armageddon's face. Despite efforts to repair the city after the last war over half a century before, it still bore a ragged share of memories. Toppled spires, broken domes, shattered cathedrals – this was the skyline after the death of a hive.

A squadron of Thunderhawk gunships pierced the caul of cloud cover. To those manning the battlements of Hades, they were a flock of crows winging down from the darkening sky.

Mordechai Ryken scanned the gunships through his magnoculars. After several seconds of zoom-blur, green reticules locked on to the streaking avian hulls and transcribed an analysis in dim white text alongside the image.

Ryken lowered the viewfinder scope. It hung on a leather cord around his neck, resting on the ochre jacket he wore as part of his uniform. His breath was hot on his face, recycled and filtered through the cheap rebreather mask he wore over his mouth and nose.

The air still tasted like a latrine, though. And it didn't exactly smell any better. The joys of high sulphur content in the atmosphere. Ryken was still waiting for the day he would be used to it, and he'd been stuck on this rock so far for every day of his thirty-seven years of life.

A way down the battlements, working on getting an anti-air turret operational, a team of his men clustered with a robed tech-priest. The multi-

barrelled monstrosity dwarfed the half a dozen soldiers standing in its shadow.

‘Sir?’ one of them voxed. Ryken knew who it was despite the shapeless overcoats they all wore. Only one of them was female.

‘What is it, Vantine?’

‘Those are Adeptus Astartes gunships, aren’t they?’

‘Good eyes.’ And they were, at that. Vantine would’ve made sniper a long time ago if she could aim worth a damn. Alas, there was more to sniping than just seeing.

‘Which ones?’ she pressed.

‘Does it matter? Adeptus Astartes are Adeptus Astartes. Reinforcements are reinforcements.’

‘Yes, but which ones?’

‘Black Templars.’ Ryken took a breath, tonguing a sore cut on his lip as he watched the fleet of Thunderhawks touching down in the distance. ‘Hundreds of them.’

An Imperial Guard column rolled out from Hades to meet the newest arrivals. A command Chimera, flying no shortage of impressive flags, led six Leman Russ battle tanks, their collective passage chewing into the newly laid rockcrete.

Bulky troop landers were still setting down elsewhere on the landing field, the wash from their engines blasting wind and gritty dust in all directions, but General Kurov of the Armageddon Steel Legion did not make personal appearances to greet just anyone.

Despite his advancing age, Kurov cut a straight-backed figure in his grimy uniform of ochre fatigues and black webbing, with flak padding on the torso. No sign of his many medals, not a hint of gold, silver, ribbon, or the other trappings of pomp. Here was the man that had led the Council of Armageddon for decades, and earned the respect of his people by wading knee-deep in the sulphur marshes and bracken forests after the last war, hunting xenos survivors in the infamous ork hunter platoons.

He stomped down the ramp, setting his cap to guard his eyes against the heatless, yet annoyingly bright, afternoon sunlight. A team of Guardsmen, each as raggedly attired as their commanding officer, clanged down the ramp after the general. As they moved, misshapen skulls clacked and rattled

together from where they hung on belts and bandoliers. Across their chests, they gripped lasguns that hadn't resembled standard-issue for some time – each bore its own display of modifications and accoutrements.

Kurov marched his ramshackle gang of bodyguards in decent parade order, yet without any conscious effort. He led them to the waiting Thunderhawks, each of which was still emitting a dull machine-whine as their boosters cycled into inactivity.

Eighteen gunships. Kurov knew that from the initial auspex report as the Templars had landed. They sat now in disorganised unmoving ranks, ramps withdrawn and bulkheads sealed. Their undersides, blunt noses and wing edges still showed a glimmer of cooling heat shields with the after-effects of planetfall.

Three Adeptus Astartes stood before the gunship fleet, still as statues, with no evidence of which vessels they'd disembarked from.

Only one wore a helm. It stared through ruby eye lenses, its faceplate a skull of steel.

'Are you Kurov?' one of the Adeptus Astartes demanded.

'I am,' the general replied. 'It is my h–'

In unison, the three inhuman warriors drew their weapons. Kurov took an involuntary step back, not out of fear but surprise. The knights' weapons went live in a humming chorus of wakening power cells. Lightning, controlled and rippling, coated the killing edges of the three artefacts.

The first was a giant clad in armour of bronze and gold against black, the surface of his war-plate inscribed with retellings of his deeds in miniscule Gothic runes, as well as trinkets, trophies and honour badges of red wax seals and papyrus strips. He clutched a two-handed sword, its blade longer than Kurov was tall, and drove its point into the ground. The knight's face was shaped by the wars he had fought – square-jawed, scarred, blunt-featured and expressionless.

The second Adeptus Astartes, clad in plainer black war-plate, wore a cloak of dark weave and scarlet lining. His sword in no way matched the grandeur of the first knight's relic, but the long blade of darkened iron was no less lethal for its simplicity. This knight's face lacked the expressionless ease of the first. He fought not to sneer as he drove his own sword tip into the ground.

And the last, the knight who still wore his helm, carried no blade. The

rockcrete beneath their feet shivered slightly under the pounding of his war-mace thudding onto the ground. The mace's head, a stylised knightly cross atop Imperial eagle wings, flared in protest, lightning crackling as the metal kissed the ground.

The three knights knelt, heads lowered. All of this happened at once, in the space of no more than three seconds since Kurov last spoke.

'We are the Emperor's knights,' the giant in bronze and gold intoned. 'We are the warriors of the Eternal Crusade, and the sons of Rogal Dorn. I am Helbrecht, High Marshal of the Black Templars. With me is Bayard, Emperor's Champion, and Grimaldus, Reclusiarch.'

At their names, both knights nodded in turn.

Helbrecht continued, his voice a growled drawl. 'Aboard our vessels in orbit are Marshals Ricard and Amalrich. We come to offer you our blades, our service, and the lives of over nine hundred warriors in the defence of your world.'

Kurov stood in silence. Nine hundred Adeptus Astartes… Entire star systems were conquered with a fraction of that. He had greeted a dozen Adeptus Astartes commanders in recent weeks, but few had brought such significant strength with them.

'High Marshal,' the general said at last. 'There is a war council forming tonight. You and your warriors are welcome there.'

'It will be done,' the High Marshal said.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Kurov replied. 'Welcome to Armageddon.'

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CHAPTER II

THE ABANDONED CRUSADE

Ryken was not smiling.

He'd been a lifelong believer in not shooting the messenger, but today that tradition was in danger of expiring. Behind him loomed an anti-air turret, blanketing them all in its shadow and shielding them from the dim glare of the morning sun. A squad of his men worked on this turret, as they had worked on countless others along the walls in the space of the last two months. It was almost operational. They weren't techs, by any means, but they knew the basic maintenance rites and calibration rituals.

'One minute to test fire,' Vantine said, her voice muffled by her rebreather mask.

And that was when the messenger showed up. It was also when Ryken stopped smiling, despite the fact the messenger was easy on the eyes, as over-starched, narrowed-eyed tactica types went.

'I want these orders rechecked,' he demanded – calmly, but a demand nevertheless.

'With all due respect, sir,' the messenger straightened her own ochre uniform, 'these orders come from the Old Man himself. He's reorganising the disposition of all our forces, and the Steel Legion are honoured to be first in that reappraisal.'

The words stole Ryken's desire to argue. So it was true, then. The Old Man was back.

'But Helsreach is half a continent away,' he tried. 'We've been working on the Hades wall-guns for months.'

'Thirty seconds to test fire,' Vantine called.

The messenger, whose name was Cyria Tyro, wasn't smiling either. In her position as adjutant quintus to General Kurov, grunts and plebeians were forever questioning the orders she relayed, as if she would ever dare alter a single word of the general's instructions. The other adjutants had no difficulties in this area, she was sure of it. For some unknown reason, these lowborn dregs just simply didn't take well to her. Perhaps they were jealous of her position? If so, then they were more foolish than she'd have given them credence for.

'I have long been entrusted with certain aspects of the general's plans,' Tyro lied, 'that frontliners such as yourself are only now being made aware of. I apologise if this is a surprise to you, major, but orders are orders. And these orders come with the highest mandate imaginable.'

'Are we not even going to defend the damn hive?'

At that moment, Vantine test-fired the turret. The floor beneath their feet shook as four cannon barrels blared their anger up at the empty sky. Ryken swore, though it was drowned out in the ear-ringing thunder of the gun's echo. Tyro also swore, though unlike Ryken's general lament, hers was aimed at Vantine and the gun crew.

The major was close to yelling over the ache in his ears. It was fading, but not fast.

'I said, *are we not even going to defend the damn hive?*'

'*You* are not,' Tyro almost pouted, her mouth compressed in restrained irritation. '*You* are going to Helsreach with your regiment. Your transports leave tonight. All of the 101st Steel Legion is to be aboard and ready for transport by sunset in six point five hours.'

Ryken paused. Six and a half hours to get three thousand men and women into heavy lifter transports, gunships and land trains. It was the kind of bad news that made the major feel the need to be overwhelmingly honest.

'Colonel Sarren is going to be furious.'

'Colonel Sarren has dealt with this assignment with grace and solemn devotion to his duty, major. Your commanding officer still has much to teach you in that regard, I see.'

'Cute. Now tell me *why* it's us being sent all the way to Helsreach. I thought Insan and the 121st were kings of that shitpile.'

'Colonel Insan had a terminal failure of his augmetic heart infusers this morning. His second officer requested Sarren by name, and General Kurov

agreed.’

‘That old bastard’s finally dead? That’ll teach him to lay off the garage-brewed sauce. Ha! All those expensive augmetics he had done, and he keels over six months later. I like that. That’s delicious.’

‘Major! Some respect, if you please.’

Ryken frowned. ‘I don’t like you,’ he told Tyro.

‘How grievous,’ the general’s assistant replied, and there was no mistaking the dark, unamused scowl on her face. ‘For you have been appointed a liaison to aid in dealings with the Adeptus Astartes and the conscripted militia.’ She looked as if she’d eaten something sour and it was still wriggling on her tongue. ‘So… I will be coming with you.’

A moment of curious kinship passed between them, almost going unspoken. They were being exiled to the same place, after all. Their eyes met in that moment, and the foundations of something like a reluctant friendship almost bloomed between them.

It was broken when Ryken walked away.

‘I still don’t like you.’

‘Hades Hive will not survive the first week.’

The man speaking is ancient, and he looks every hour of his age. What keeps him on his feet is a mixture of minimal rejuvenat chem-surgeries, crude bionics, and a faith in the Emperor founded in hatred for the enemies of man.

I liked him the moment my visor’s targeting reticules locked on to him. Both piety and hate echo in his every word.

He should not hold rank here – not to the degree he does. He is merely a commissar in the Imperial Guard, and such a title does not tend to make generals, colonels, Adeptus Astartes captains and Chapter Masters remain in polite silence when it comes to tactical planning. Yet to the humans at this war council, and the citizens of Armageddon, he is the Old Man, a beloved hero of the Second War fifty-seven years ago.

Not just a hero. *The* hero.

His name is Sebastian Yarrick. Even we Adeptus Astartes must respect that name.

And when he tells us all that Hades Hive will be destroyed within a matter of days, a hundred Imperial commanders, human and Adeptus Astartes

alike, hang on his every word.

I am one of them. This will be my first true command.

Commissar Sebastian Yarrick leans over the edge of a hololithic display table. With his remaining hand – the other arm is nothing but a stump – he keys in coordinates on the numeric datapad, and the hololith projection of Hades Hive widens with flickering impatience to display both of the planet's hemispheres in insignificant detail.

The Old Man, a gaunt and wizened human of sharp features and skeletally-obvious facial bones, gestures to the blip on the map that represents Hades Hive and its surrounding territories. Wastelands, in the main.

'Six decades ago,' he says, 'the Great Enemy met his defeat at Hades. Our defence here was what won us that war.'

There are general murmurs of assent. The commissar's voice carries around the expansive chamber through floating skull drones equipped with vox-speakers where their jaws had once been.

I am surrounded by the familiar hum of active power armour, though the scents and faces that meet my eyes are new to me. Standing to my left at a respectful distance, his face raggedly proud around extensive bionics, is Chapter Master Seth of the Flesh Tearers – known to his men as the Guardian of the Rage. He smells of sacred weapon oils, his primarch's potent blood running beneath his weathered skin, and the spicy, unwholesome reptilian scent of the lizard predator-kings that stalk the jungles of his home world. Seth is flanked by his own officers, all bareheaded and with faces as pitted and cracked as their master's. Whatever wars have occupied the Flesh Tearers in recent decades, the conflicts have not been kind to them.

To my left, my liege Helbrecht stands resplendent in his battle armour of black and bronze. Bayard, the Emperor's Champion, is by his side. Both rest their helmets on the table's surface, the stern helms distorting the edge of the hololithic display, and give their full attention to the ancient commissar.

I cross my arms over my chest and do the same.

'Why?' someone asks. Their voice is low, too low to be human, and carries over the chamber without the need of vox-amplification. A hundred heads turn to regard an Adeptus Astartes in the bright red-orange of a lesser Chapter, one unknown to me. He steps forward, leaning his knuckles on the

table, facing Yarrick from almost twenty metres distance.

‘We recognise Brother-Captain Amaras,’ an Imperial herald announces from his position at Yarrick’s side, smoothing the formal blue robes of his office. He bangs the butt of his staff on the ground three times. ‘Commander of the Angels of Fire.’

Amaras nods in thanks, and fixes Yarrick with his unblinking gaze.

‘Why would the greenskin warlord simply annihilate the greatest battlefield of the last war? Surely our forces should muster at Hades and stand ready to defend against the largest assault.’

Murmurs of agreement ripple throughout the gathered commanders. Emboldened, Amaras smiles at Yarrick.

‘We are the Emperor’s Chosen, mortal. We are His Angels of Death. We have centuries of battle experience compared to these human commanders at your side.’

‘No,’ another voice replies. This one is distorted into a vox-borne snarl, filtered through a helm’s speakers. I swallow as the herald bangs the staff another three times.

I had not realised I’d spoken out loud.

‘We recognise Brother-Chaplain Grimaldus,’ he calls out. ‘Reclusiarch of the Black Templars.’

Grimaldus shook his head at the gathered commanders. Over a hundred, human and Adeptus Astartes, all standing around the huge table in this converted auditorium once used for whatever dreary theatre performances occurred on a manufactory world. A riot of colours, heraldry, symbols of unity, varied uniforms, regimental designations and iconography. General Kurov stood at the commissar’s shoulder, deferring to the Old Man in all things.

‘The xenos do not think as we do,’ Grimaldus said. ‘The greenskins do not come to Armageddon for vengeance, or to seek to bleed us for the defeats they have suffered at Imperial hands in the past. They come for the pleasure of violence.’

Yarrick, a skeleton wreathed in pale flesh and a dark uniform, watched the knight in silence. Amaras pounded his fist onto the table and pointed at the Templar. For a moment of deathly calm, Grimaldus considered drawing his pistol and slaying him where he stood.

‘That lends credence to *my* belief,’ Amaras almost snarled.

‘Not at all. Have you inspected what remains of Hades Hive? It is a ruin. There is nothing to fight over, nothing to defend. The Great Enemy knows this. He will be aware that Imperial forces will put up no more than a token resistance here, and fall back to defend hives that are still worth defending. It is likely the warlord will obliterate Hades from orbit, rather than seek to take it.’

‘We cannot let this hive fall! It is a symbol of mankind’s defiance! With respect, Chaplain–’

‘Enough,’ Yarrick said. ‘Peace, Brother-Captain Amaras. Grimaldus speaks with wisdom.’

Grimaldus inclined his head in thanks.

‘I will not be silenced by a mortal,’ Amaras growled, but the fight was gone from him. Yarrick – the thin, ancient commissar – just stared at the Adeptus Astartes captain. After several moments, Amaras looked back to the hololithic topography around the hive. Yarrick turned back to the gathered officers, his one human eye stern and his augmetic one whirring in its socket as it refocused on the faces before him.

‘Hades will not survive the first week,’ he said again, this time shaking his head. ‘We must abandon the hive and spread the forces here to other bastions of strength. This is not the Second War. What is coming in-system now far exceeds what has laid waste to the planet before. The other hives must be reinforced a thousand times over.’ He took a moment to clear his throat, and a cough stole over him, dry and hoarse. When it subsided, the Old Man smiled without even the ghost of humour.

‘Hades will burn. We must make our stand elsewhere.’

At this cue, General Kurov stepped forward with a data-slate.

‘We come to the divisions of command.’ He took a breath, and pressed on. ‘The fleet that will besiege Armageddon is too vast to repel.’

A chorus of jeers rose. Kurov rode them out. Grimaldus, Helbrecht and Bayard were among those that remained absolutely silent.

‘Hear me, friends and brothers,’ Kurov sighed. ‘And hear me well. Those of you who insist this war will be anything more than a conflict of bitter attrition are deceiving yourselves. At current estimates, we have over fifty thousand Adeptus Astartes in the Armageddon subsector, and thirty times the number of Imperial Guardsmen. And it will still not be enough to secure

a clean victory. At our best estimations, Battlefleet Armageddon, the orbital defences, and the Adeptus Astartes fleets remaining in the void will be able to deny the enemy landing for nine days. These are our *best* estimates.'

'And the worst?' asked an Adeptus Astartes officer bedecked in white wolf furs, wearing the grey war-plate of the Space Wolves. His body language betrayed his impatience. He almost paced, like a canine in a cage.

'Four days,' the Old Man said through his grim smile.

Silence descended again. Kurov didn't waste it.

'Admiral Parol of Battlefleet Armageddon has outlined his plan and uploaded it to the tactical network for all commanders to review. Once the orbital war is lost, be it four days or nine, our fleets will break from the planet in a fighting withdrawal. From then on, Armageddon will be defenceless beyond what is already entrenched upon the surface. The orks will be free to land whatever and wherever they wish.

'Admiral Parol will lead the remaining Naval ships of the fleet in repeated guerrilla strikes against the invaders' vessels still in orbit.'

'Who will lead the Adeptus Astartes vessels?' Captain Amaras spoke up again.

There was another pause, before Commissar Yarrick nodded to a dark-armoured cluster of warriors across the table.

'Given his seniority and the expertise of his Chapter, High Marshal Helbrecht of the Black Templars will take overall command of the Adeptus Astartes fleets.'

And once more, there was uproar, several Adeptus Astartes commanders demanding that the glory be theirs. The knights ignored it.

'We are to remain in orbit?' Grimaldus leaned closer to his commander and voiced the question.

The High Marshal didn't take his eyes from Yarrick. 'We are the obvious choice to command the Adeptus Astartes elements in the orbital battles.'

The Chaplain looked across the chamber, at the various leaders and officers of a hundred different forces.

I was wrong, he thought. I will not die in futility on this world. Eagerness, hot and urgent, flushed through his system, as real and vital as a flood of adrenaline gushing through his two hearts.

'The *Crusader* will plunge like a lance into the core of their fleet. High Marshal, we can slaughter the greenskin tyrant before he even sets foot on

the world below us.’

Helbrecht lifted his gaze from the ancient commissar as his Chaplain spoke. He turned to Grimaldus, his dark eyes piercing the other knight’s skull mask with their intensity.

‘I have already spoken with the other marshals, my brother. We must leave a contingent on the surface. I will lead the orbital crusade. Amalrich and Ricard will lead the forces in the Ash Wastes. All that remains is a single crusade, to defend one of the hive cities that yet remains ungarrisoned by Adeptus Astartes.’

Grimaldus shook his head. ‘That is not our duty, my liege. Both Amalrich and Ricard have a host of honours inscribed upon their armour. Each has led greater crusades alone. Neither will relish an exile to a filthy manufactorum hive while a thousand of their brothers wage a glorious war in the heavens. You would shame them.’

‘And yet,’ Helbrecht was implacable, his features set in stone, ‘a commander must remain.’

‘Don’t.’ The knight’s blood ran cold. ‘Don’t do this.’

‘It is already done.’

‘No,’ he said, and meant it with every fibre of his being. *‘No.’*

‘This is not the time. The decision is made, Grimaldus. I know you, as I knew Mordred. You will not refuse this honour.’

‘No,’ Grimaldus said again, loud enough that other commanders began to stare.

Helbrecht said nothing. Grimaldus stepped closer to him.

‘I would burst the Great Enemy’s black heart in my hand, and cast his blasphemous flagship to the surface of Armageddon wreathed in holy fire. Do not leave me here, Helbrecht. Do not deny me this glory.’

‘You will not refuse this honour,’ the High Marshal said, his voice as stony as his face.

Grimaldus wanted no further part in the proceedings. Worse, he knew he was irrelevant here. As deliberations and tactics were discussed for the coming orbital defence, he turned from the hololithic display.

‘Wait, brother.’ Helbrecht’s voice made it a request, not an order, and that made it easy to refuse.

Grimaldus stalked from the chamber without another word.

Their destination was called, with bleakness so typical of this world, Helsreach.

‘Blood of Dorn,’ Artarion swore with feeling. ‘Now that’s a sight.’

‘This is… huge,’ Nerovar whispered.

The four Thunderhawks tore across the sulphurous sky, parting sick yellow clouds that drifted apart in their wake. From the cockpit of the lead aircraft, six knights watched the expansive city below.

And *expansive* barely covered it.

The four gunships, boosters howling, veered in graceful unison around one of the tallest industrial spires. It was slate-grey, belching thick smoke into the dirty sky, merely one of hundreds.

A wing of escorts, small and manoeuvrable Lightning-pattern air superiority fighters, coasted alongside the Adeptus Astartes Thunderhawks. They were neither welcome nor unwelcome, merely ignored.

‘We cannot be the only Adeptus Astartes strength sent to this city,’ Nerovar removed his white helmet with a hiss of venting air pressure and stared with naked eyes at the metropolis flashing beneath. ‘How can we hold this alone?’

‘We will not be alone,’ Sergeant Bastilan said. ‘The Guard is with us. And militia forces.’

‘Humans,’ Priamus sneered.

‘The Legio Invigilata has landed to the east of the city,’ Bastilan said to the swordsman. ‘Titans, my brother. I don’t see you sneering at that.’

Priamus didn’t answer. But nor did he agree.

‘What is that?’

The knights leaned forward at their leader’s words. Grimaldus gestured down at a vast stretch of rockcreted roadway, wide enough to accommodate the landing of a bulk cruiser or a wallowing Imperial Guard troop carrier.

‘A highway, sir,’ the pilot said. He checked his instruments. ‘Hel’s Highway.’

Grimaldus was silent for several moments, just watching the colossal road and the thousands upon thousands of conveyances making their way along it in both directions.

‘This roadway splits the city like a spine. I see hundreds of capillary roads and byways leading from it.’

‘So?’ Priamus asked, his tone indicating just how little he cared about the

answer.

‘So,’ Grimaldus turned back to the squad, ‘whoever holds Hel’s Highway holds the beating heart of the city in their hands. They will have unprecedented, unstoppable ability to manoeuvre troops and armour. Even Titans will move faster, at perhaps twice the speed than if they had to stalk through hive towers and city blocks.’

Nerovar shook his head. He was the only one without his helm covering his features. Insofar as it was possible for an Adeptus Astartes to look uncertain, he was doing so now.

‘Reclusiarch.’ He spoke Grimaldus’s new title with hesitancy. ‘How can we defend… all *this*? An endless road that leads into to a thousand others.’

‘With blade and bolter,’ said Bastilan. ‘With faith and fire.’

Grimaldus recognised his own words spoken from the sergeant’s mouth. He looked down in silence at the city below, at the insane stretch of road that left the entire hive open, accessible.

Vulnerable.

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CHAPTER III

HIVE HELSREACH

The Thunderhawks touched down on a landing pad that was clearly designed for freight use. Cranes moved and servitors droned out of their way as the gunships came down in a hovering shower of engine wash and heat shimmer.

Ramps clanged onto the landing pad's surface and the four gunships disgorged their living cargo – one hundred knights in orderly ranks, marching into formation before their Thunderhawks.

Watching this display, and desperately trying not to show how impressed he felt, was Colonel Sarren of the Armageddon 101st Steel Legion. He stood with his hands clasped together, fingers interlaced, over his not inconsiderable stomach. Flanking him were a dozen men, some soldiers, some civilians, and all nervous – to varying degrees – about the hundred giants in black armour forming up before them.

He cleared his throat, checked the buttons on his ochre greatcoat were fastened in correct order, and marched to the giants.

One of the giants, wearing a helm shaped into a grinning skull mask of shining silver and steel, stepped forward to meet the colonel. With him came five other knights, carrying swords and massive bolters, but for one who bore a towering standard. Upon the banner, which waved lazily in the dull breeze, a scene of red and black depicted the skull-helmed knight bathed in the golden purity of a flaming aquila overhead.

'I am Grimaldus,' the first knight said, his gem-like eye lenses staring down at the portly colonel. 'Reclusiarch of the Helsreach Crusade.'

The colonel drew breath to make his own greeting, when the hundred

knights in formation cried out a chant in skin-crawling unity.

‘Imperator Vult!’

Sarren glanced at the ranks of knights, formed up in five ranks of twenty warriors. None of them seemed to have moved, despite their cry in High Gothic: *The Emperor wills it.*

‘I am Colonel Sarren of the 101st Steel Legion, and overall commander of the Imperial Guard forces defending the hive.’ He offered a hand to the towering knight, and turned the gesture quite smartly into a salute when it became clear the knight was not going to shake hands.

Muted clicks could be heard every few seconds from the helms of the knights standing closest to him. Sarren knew full well they were speaking with each other over a shared vox-channel. He didn’t like it, not at all.

‘Who are these others?’ the first knight asked. With a war maul of brutal size and weight, he gestured to Sarren’s staff arrayed in a loose crescent behind the colonel. ‘I would meet every commander of this hive, if they are present.’

‘They are present, sir,’ Sarren said. ‘Allow me to make introductions.’

‘Reclusiarch,’ Grimaldus growled. ‘Not “sir”.’

‘As you wish, Reclusiarch. ‘This is Cyria Tyro, adjutant quintus to General Kurov.’ Grimaldus looked down at the slender, dark-haired female. She made no effort to salute. Instead, she spoke.

‘I am to act as liaison between off-planet forces – such as yours, Reclusiarch, and the Titan Legion – and the soldiers of Hive Helsreach. Simply summon me if you require my aid,’ she finished.

‘I will,’ Grimaldus said, knowing he would not.

‘This is Commissar Falkov, of my command staff,’ Colonel Sarren resumed.

The officer named clicked his heels together and made an immaculate sign of the aquila over his chest. The commissar’s dark uniform singled him out with absolute clarity among the ochre-wearing Steel Legion officers.

‘This is Major Mordechai Ryken, second officer of the 101st and XO of the city defence.’

Ryken made the aquila himself, and offered a cautious nod of greeting.

‘Commander Korten Barasath,’ Sarren introduced the next man, ‘of the Imperial 5082nd Naval Wing.’

Korten, a lean figure still dressed in his grey flightsuit, saluted smartly.

‘My men were in the Lightnings that guided you down, Reclusiarch. A pleasure to serve with the Black Templars again.’

Grimaldus narrowed his eyes behind his helm’s false grin. ‘You have served with the Knights of Dorn before?’

‘I have personally – nine years ago on Dathax – and the Fifty-Eighty-Twos have on no fewer than four separate occasions. Sixteen of our fighters are marked with the heraldic cross, with permission given by Marshal Tarrison of the Dathax Crusade.’

Grimaldus inclined his head, his respect solemn and obvious, despite the helm.

‘I am honoured, Barasath,’ he said.

The squadron leader suppressed a pleased smile and saluted again.

And on it went, through the ranks of senior Steel Legion officers. At the end of the line stood two men, one in a clean and decorated uniform of azure blue, the shade of skies on worlds much cleaner than this one, and the other in oil-stained overalls.

Colonel Sarren gestured to the thin man in the immaculate uniform.

‘The most honourable Moderati Primus Valian Carsomir of the Legio Invigilata, crewman of the blessed engine *Stormherald.*’

Grimaldus nodded, but made no other outward show of respect. The Titan pilot inclined his gaunt face in turn, utterly emotionless.

‘Moderati,’ the knight said. ‘You speak with the voice of your Legion?’

‘A full battle group,’ the man replied. ‘I am the voice of Princeps Majoris Zarha Mancion. The rest of Invigilata is committed to other engagements.’

‘Fortune favours us that you still remain,’ the knight said. The Titan pilot made the cog sign of the Mechanicus, his knuckles interlinked over his chest, and Sarren finished the final introduction.

‘And here is Dockmaster Tomaz Maghernus, lead foreman of the Helsreach Dockers’ Union.’

The knight hesitated, and nodded again, just as he had for the soldiers. ‘We have much to discuss,’ Grimaldus said to the colonel, who was sweating faintly in the stifling afternoon air.

‘Indeed we do. This way, if you please.’

Tomaz Maghernus wasn’t sure what to think.

Back at the docks, as soon as he walked into the warehouse, his crew

flocked around him, barraging him with questions. *How many Adeptus Astartes were there? How tall were they? What was it like to see one? Were all the stories true?*

Tomaz wasn't sure what to say. There had been little grandeur in the meeting. The towering warrior with his skull face had seemed more dismissive than anything else. The ranks of knights in their black armour were silent and inhuman, utterly separate from the hive's delegation and not interacting at all.

He answered the questions with a level of vagueness lessened by a convincing false smile.

An hour later, he was back in his crane's command cabin, strapped to the creaking leather seat and turning the axis wheel to bring the loading claw around again. Levers controlled the claw's vertical position and the grip of its magnetic talons. Tomaz slammed the claw onto the deck of the tanker ship closest to his station, and hauled a cargo crate into the air. The markings alongside the sturdy metal crate marked it as volatile. More promethium, he knew. The final imports of fuel for the Imperial Guard's tanks were arriving this week. Dried food rations and shipments of fuel were all they'd been unloading on the docks for months now.

He tried not to dwell on his meeting with the Adeptus Astartes. He'd been expecting a rousing speech from a warrior armoured in gold. He'd expected plans and promises, oaths and oratory.

All in all, he decided, it had been a disappointing day.

A city.

I am in command of a *city.*

Preparations have been under way for months, but estimates pit the Great Enemy arriving in-system within a handful of days. My men, the precious few knights that remain with me on the surface of Armageddon, are spread across the sprawling hive. They are to serve as inspiration to the human soldiers when the fighting becomes thickest.

I recognise the tactical validity of this, yet lament their absence. This is not how a holy crusade should be fought.

The hours pass in a blur of statistical outlays, charts, hololithic projections and graphs.

The food supplies for the entire city. How long they will last once nothing

can be brought in from outside the hive. Where the food is stored. The durability of these silos, buildings and granaries. What weapons they can withstand. How they appear from the air. Ration projections. Sustainable food ration planning. Unsustainable food ration planning, with appended lists of estimated sacrificial casualties. Where food riots are likely to break out once starvation is a reality.

Water filtration centres. How many are required to be fully operational in order to supply the entire population. Which ones are likely to be destroyed first, once the city walls fall. Underground bunkers where water is currently stored. Ancient wellsprings that might be tapped in times of great need.

Estimates of disease once the city is shelled and civilian casualties are too heavy to be dealt with efficiently. Types of disease. Symptoms. Severity. Risk of contagion. Compatibility with the ork genus.

Lists of medical facilities. Endless, endless screeds of how each one is supplied as of the most recent stock reports, to the most minute detail. New stock-checks are constantly performed. Updated information cycles in all the while, even as we review the previous batch.

Militia numbers, conscripted and volunteer. Training regimes and training schedules. Weapon supplies. Ammunition supplies for the civilian population currently under arms. Projections for how long those supplies will last.

Hive Defence Forces, straddling the line between militia and Guard. Who leads the individual sector forces. Their weapons. Their ammunition. Their proximity to significant industrial targets.

Imperial Guard numbers. Throne, what numbers. Regiments, their officers, their live fire training accuracy records, their citations, their shames, their moments of greatest glory and ignominy on a host of distant worlds. Their insignia. Their weapon and ammunition supplies. Their access to armour units, ranging from light scout vehicles such as Sentinels and Chimeras, through to super-heavy Baneblades and Stormswords.

The Guard figures alone take two days to file through. And this, they say, is merely the overview.

Landing platforms come next. Hive Defence landing platforms, civilian sites already in use by the Guard, and civilian sites currently in use for the importation of essential supplies, either from Navy vessels, traders in orbit, or elsewhere on the planet. The access to and from these sites is critical,

regarding reinforcements making it into the hive, refugees making their way out, and the enemy capturing them as bases when the siege begins.

Air superiority. The numbers of light fighters, heavy fighters, and bombers at our disposal. The records of every pilot and officer among the Imperial 5082nd Skyborne. These, I skip past. If they wear the Templar cross with permission of a marshal, then there is little need to review their acts of valour. It is already clear. The projections move on to simulated displays of how long our air forces can prevent enemy landings, and what situations would merit the use of bombers beyond the city walls. On and on, the simulations roll in flickering hololithic imagery. Barasath is relieved to go when it is complete, complaining of a dozen headaches at once. I smile, though I let none of the humans witness it.

Helsreach heavy defence emplacements. What anti-air turrets are stationed on the walls, and where they are. Their optimal firing arcs. The make and calibre of each barrel and shell. The number of crew appointed to man these positions. Estimated projections on damage they can inflict upon the enemy, run through countless scenarios of varying greenskin offensive strength. The teams resupplying their ammunition, and from where that ammunition comes. Freight routes from manufactories.

And the manufactories themselves. Industrial plants churning out legions of tanks, all of various classes. Other manufactories where shells are made and dispatched for use. Which industrial sites are the most valuable, the most profitable, the most reliable and the most likely to suffer assault in a protracted siege.

The Titan Legion, most noble and glorious Invigilata. What engines they have on the Ash Wastes outside the city. Which ones will walk in the defence of Helsreach, and which ones are promised to reinforce the hordes of Cadian Shock and our brother Adeptus Astartes, the Salamanders, out in the wilds of Armageddon.

Invigilata keeps its internal records from our sight, but we are fed enough information to thread into yet more hololithic charts and simulations, adding the might of Titans – of various grades and sizes – to the potential carnage.

The docks. The Helsreach Docks, greatest port on the planet. Coastal defences – walls and turrets and anti-air towers – and trade requirements and union complaints and petitions arguing over docking rights and

warehouses appropriated as barracks for soldiers and complaints from merchants and dock-officers and…

And I endure this for nine days.

Nine. Days.

On the tenth day, I rise from my chair in Sarren's command centre. Around me in the colonel's armoured fortress at the heart of the city, three hundred servitors and junior officers work at stations: calculating, collating, transmitting, receiving, talking, shouting, and sometimes quietly panicking, begging for aid from those around them.

Sarren and several of his officers and aides watch me. Their necks crane up as they follow my movement. It is the first time I have moved in seven hours. Indeed, the first time I have moved since I sat down this morning at dawn.

'Is something wrong?' Sarren asks me.

I look at the sweating, porcine commander; this man unable to shape his body into a warrior's fitness, confined as he is – and totally at home – with this relentless trial of a million, million numbers.

What kind of question is that? Are they blind? I am one of the Emperor's Chosen. I am a knight of Dorn's blood, and a warrior-priest of the Black Templars. *Is something wrong?*

'Yes,' I say to him, to them all. 'Something is wrong.'

'But… what?'

I do not answer that question. Instead, I move to walk from the room, not caring that uniformed humans scatter before me like frightened vermin.

With a volume that would put a peal of overhead thunder to shame, a siren starts to wail.

I turn back to the table.

'What is that?'

They flinch at the rough bark from my helm's vocaliser. The siren keeps whining.

'Throne of the God-Emperor,' Sarren whispers.

Hive Helsreach did not have city walls. It had battlements.

When the citywide siren began to ring, Artarion was standing in the shadow of a towering cannon, its linked barrels aiming into the sick sky. Several metres away, the human crew worked at its base, performing the

daily rituals of maintenance. They hesitated at the sound of the siren, and talked among themselves.

Artarion briefly looked back in the direction of the tower fortress in the city's centre, blocked as it was from view by distance and the forest-like mess of hive spires between here and there.

He felt the humans casting occasional glances his way. Knowing he was distracting them from their necessary mechanical rites, he moved away, walking further down the wall. His gaze fell, as it did almost every hour since coming to the hive a week before, on the endless expanse of wasteland that reached to the horizon and beyond.

Blink-clicking a communication rune on his visor display, he opened a vox-channel. The siren rang on. Artarion knew what it signalled.

'About time.'

From vox-towers across the city, an announcement was spoken in deceptively colourless tones. Colonel Sarren, not wishing to incite the populace to unrest, had tasked a lobotomised servitor to speak the words to the people.

'**People of Hive Helsreach. Across the planet, the first sirens are sounding. Do not be alarmed. Do not be alarmed. The enemy fleet has translated in-system. The might of Battlefleet Armageddon and the greatest Adeptus Astartes fleet in Imperial history stands between our world and the foe's forces. Do not be alarmed. Maintain your daily rites of faith. Trust in the God-Emperor of Mankind. That is all.**'

In the control centre, Grimaldus turned to the closest human officer sat at a vox-station.

'You. Hail the Black Templars flagship *Eternal Crusader,* immediately.'

The man swallowed, his skin paling at being spoken to so directly and with such force by an Adeptus Astartes.

'I… My lord, I am coordinating the–'

The knight's black fist pounded into the table. *'Do it now.'*

'Y-yes, my lord. A moment, please.'

The human officers of Sarren's staff shared a worried look. Grimaldus paid no attention at all. The seconds passed with sickening slowness.

'The *Eternal Crusader* is making ready to engage the enemy fleet,' the officer replied. 'I can send a message, but their two-way communications

are in lockdown without the proper command codes. D-do you have the codes, my lord?'

Grimaldus did indeed have the codes. He looked at the frightened human, then back at the worried faces of the command staff as they sat at the table.

I am being a fool. My fury is blinding me to my sworn duty. What did he expect, truly? That Helbrecht would send down a Thunderhawk and allow him to take part in the glorious orbital war above? No. He was consigned here, to Helsreach, and there would be no other fate beyond this.

I will die on this world, he thought once more.

'I have the codes,' the knight replied, 'but this is not an emergency. Simply send the following message to their incoming logs, with no need for a reply: "Fight well, brothers."'

'Sent, lord.'

Grimaldus nodded. 'My thanks.' He turned to the gathered officers, and leaned over the hololithic display, his gauntleted knuckles on the table's surface.

'Forgive me a moment's choler. We have a war to plan,' the knight said, and breathed out the most difficult words he had ever spoken. 'And a city to defend.'

Until their dying nights, the warriors of the Helsreach Crusade bore their lamentations and rage with all the dignity that could be expected of them. But it was no easy feat. No easy feat to be consigned to a city of several million frightened souls while above the stained clouds, hundreds upon hundreds of their battle-brothers were carving their glory from the steel and flesh of an ancient and hated foe. The Black Templars across the city looked skywards, as if their helms' red eye lenses could pierce the wretched clouds and see the holy war above.

Grimaldus's own anger was a physical ache. It burned behind his eyes, and beat acid through his veins. But he mastered it, as was his duty. He sat at the table with the human planners, and agreed with them, disagreed, nodded and argued.

At one point, a whisper made its way through the room. It was a serpentine thing, as if it threaded its way from human mouths to human ears seeking to avoid enraging the black-clad Adeptus Astartes knight. When Colonel Sarren cleared his throat and announced that the two fleets had engaged,

Grimaldus simply nodded. He'd heard the very first whispers thirty seconds before, of crackled voices coming over the vox-headsets of those at the communication stations.

It was beginning.

'We should give the order,' Sarren said quietly, to murmured agreement among the officer cadre.

Grimaldus turned to the vox-officer he had spoken to before. This time, he glanced at the man's rank badge. The officer saw the silver skull helm nod once in his direction.

'Lieutenant,' the knight said.

'Yes, Reclusiarch?'

'Give the order to Imperial forces throughout Helsreach. Martial law is in immediate effect.' He felt his throat dry at the gravity of what he was saying.

'Seal the city.'

Four thousand anti-air turrets along the hive's towering walls primed and aimed their multiple barrels into the sky.

Atop countless spires and manufactory rooftops, secondary defence lasers did the same. Hangars and warehouses converted for use by the Naval air squadrons readied the short rockcrete runways necessary for STOL fighters. Grey-uniformed Naval armsmen patrolled their bases' perimeters, keeping their sites enclosed and operating almost independently of the rest of the hive.

Across the city, recently-established makeshift roadway checkpoints became barricades and outposts of defence in readiness for the walls falling to the enemy. Thousands of buildings that had been serving as barracks for the Imperial Guard and militia forces sealed themselves with flakboard-reinforced doors and windows.

Announcements from vox-towers ordered the citizens of the hive who weren't engaged in vital industrial duty to remain in their homes until summoned by Guard squads and escorted to the underground shelters.

Hel's Highway, lifeline of the hive, was strangled by Guard checkpoints clearing the way of civilian traffic, making room for processions of tanks and Sentinel walkers, a rattling, grinding parade stretching over a kilometre. Clusters of the war machines veered off as they dispersed across the hive.

Helsreach was locked down, and its defenders clutched their weapons as they stared into the bleak sky.

Unseen by any of the humans within the city, one hundred knights – separated by distance but united by the blood of a demigod in their veins – knelt in silent prayer.

Eighteen minutes after the sirens started to wail, the first serious problem with force deployment began. Representatives of Legio Invigilata demanded to speak with the hive's commanders.

Forty-two minutes later, born entirely of panic, the first civilian riot broke out.

I ask Sarren a reasonable question, and he responds with the very answer I have no wish to hear.

'Three days,' he says.

Invigilata needs three days. Three days to finish the fitting and arming of their Titans out in the wastelands before they can be deployed within the city. Three days before they can walk through the immense gates in the hive's impenetrable walls, and station themselves within the city limits according to the agreed upon plan.

And then Sarren makes it worse.

'In three days, they will decide if they are to come to our aid, or deploy along the Hemlock River with the rest of their Legio.'

I quench the rush of fury through a moment's significant effort. 'There is a chance they will not even walk in our defence?'

'So it seems,' Sarren nods.

'Projections have the enemy breaching the orbital defences in four to nine days,' one of the other Steel Legion colonels – his name is Hargus – speaks from across the table. 'So we have time to allow them the largesse they require.'

None of us are seated now. The siren's drone has been lowered to less inconvenient levels, and speech is a realistic possibility for the unenhanced human officers once again.

'I am going to the view-tower,' I inform them. 'I wish to look upon this problem with my own eyes. Is the moderati primus still within the hive?'

'Yes, Reclusiarch.'

'Tell him meet to me there.' I pause as I stride from the room, and look

back over my shoulder. ‘Be polite, but do not ask. Tell him.’

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CHAPTER IV

INVIGILATA

Moderati Primus Valian Carsomir scratched at the greying stubble that darkened his jawline. His time was limited, and he had made that clear.

‘You are not alone in that position,’ Grimaldus pointed out.

Carsomir smiled darkly, though not without empathy. ‘The difference, Reclusiarch, is that I do not intend to die here. My princeps majoris is still in doubt if Invigilata will walk for Helsreach.’

The knight moved to the railing, his armour joints humming with the gentle motions. The viewing platform was a modest space atop the central spire of the command fortress, but Grimaldus had spent much of his time up here each night, staring over the hive as it made ready for war.

In the faded distance, over the city walls, his gene-enhanced sight could make out the skeletal details of Titans on the horizon. There, in the wastelands, Invigilata’s engines also made ready. Fat-hulled landers made the wallowing journey back into orbit as part of the final phase of Imperial deployment. Soon, within a matter of days, there would be no hope of landing anything more on the planet’s surface.

‘This is the greatest of Armageddon’s port cities. We are about to be assaulted by the largest greenskin-breed xenos invasion ever endured by the Imperium of Man.’ The Adeptus Astartes did not turn to the Titan pilot. He watched the gigantic war machines, blurred by the sandy mist of distant dust storms. ‘We must have Titans, Carsomir.’

The officer stepped alongside the Adeptus Astartes, his bionic eyes – both with lenses of multifaceted jade set in bronze mountings – clicking and whirring as he followed the knight’s gaze over the city and beyond.

‘I am aware of your need.’

‘*My* need? It is the hive’s need. Armageddon’s need.’

‘As you say, the hive’s need. But I am not the princeps majoris. I report on the hive’s defences to her, and the decision is hers to make. Invigilata has received strong petitions from other cities, and other forces.’

Grimaldus closed his eyes in thought. Unblinking, his skulled helm continued to stare at the distant Titans.

‘I must speak with her.’

‘I am her eyes, ears and voice, Reclusiarch. What I know, she knows; what I say, she has bid me speak. If you wish, I could – perhaps – arrange a conversation over the vox. But I am here – a man of not inconsiderable station myself – to show that Invigilata is earnest in its dealings with you.’

Grimaldus said nothing for several seconds.

‘I appreciate that. I am not blind to your rank. Tell me, moderati, is it permissible to speak with your princeps majoris in person?’

‘No, Reclusiarch. That would be a violation of Invigilata tradition.’

Grimaldus’s brown eyes opened once more, drinking in the scarce detail of the war machines on the horizon.

‘Your objection is noted,’ the knight said, ‘and duly ignored.’

‘What?’ the Titan pilot said, not sure he heard correctly.

Grimaldus didn’t answer. He was already speaking into the vox.

‘Artarion, ready the Land Raider. We’re going out into the wastelands.’

Four hours later, Grimaldus and his brothers stood in the shadows cast by giants.

A light dust storm sent grit rattling against their war-plate, which they ignored as easily as Grimaldus had ignored Carsomir’s offended protests about the nature of this mission.

Crews of servitors laboured at the ground level, and while they were mind-wiped never to process or acknowledge physical discomfort, the abrasive wasteland grit was rubbing their exposed skin raw, and crudely sandblasting mechanical parts.

The Titans themselves stood watch over the wastelands in austere vigil – nineteen of them in total, ranging from the smaller twelve-crew Warhound-classes, to the larger Reaver- and Warlord-classes. Godlike, immune to the elements, the Titans were bedecked in the crawling forms of tech-adepts

and maintenance drones performing the rites of awakening.

Despite their slumber, it was anything but silent. The grinding, deafening machine-whine of internal plasma reactors trying to start was a sound from primordial nightmare, ripped right from worlds where humans feared gigantic reptilian predators and their ground-shaking roars.

It was all too easy to imagine hundreds of robed tech-priests within the fleet of Titans, chanting and praying to their Machine-God and the spirits of these slumbering war-giants. As Grimaldus and his brothers walked in the shade cast by one Warlord, the relentless grind of metal on metal became a full-throated thunderclap that broke the air like a sonic boom. Heated air blasted outwards from the Titan's hull, and around the site, thousands of men instantly fell to their knees in the sand, facing the Titan and murmuring their reverence in the aftershock of its rebirth.

The Titan's birth cry rang out through its warning sirens. The sound was somewhere between pure mechanical noise and organic exultation; as loud as a hundred manufactories with a full workforce, and as terrible as the wrath of a newborn god.

It moved. Not with speed, but with the halting, unsure strides of a man that has not used his muscles in many months. One splayed claw of a foot, easily huge enough to crush a Land Raider, rose several metres off the ground. It crashed back to earth a moment later, blasting dust in all directions.

'Sacrosanct awakens!' came the cry from hundreds of vox-altered voices. *'Sacrosanct walks!'*

The Titan answered the worshipful cries of its cult below. It roared again, the cry blaring from its speaker horns and echoing across the wastelands.

As impressive as the sight was, it was not why Grimaldus had led his men out here. Their goal was larger still, dwarfing even these mighty Warlords, paying them no heed as they stood or walked around at the height of its weapon-arms.

It was called *Stormherald.*

The battle-class Titans were walking weapons platforms, capable of levelling hive blocks. *Stormherald* was a walking fortress. Its weapons could level cities. Its legs, capable of supporting the weight of this colossal sixty-metre war machine, were bastions – barracks – with turrets and arched windows for the troops transported within to fire at the foe even as their

Titan crushed them underfoot. Upon its hunched back, *Stormherald* carried crenellated battlements and the seven spires of a sacred, armoured cathedral devoted to the Emperor in His aspect as the Machine-God. Gargoyles clung to the edges of the architecture, carved around defence turrets and stained glass windows, their hideous mouths open as they wailed silently at the enemy from their holy castle above the ground.

Banners hung from its cannon arms and the battlements themselves, listing the names of enemy war machines it had slain in the millennia since its birth. As the birth cry of *Sacrosanct* faded, the knights could hear the sound of religious communion in the fortress-cathedral on *Stormherald*'s giant shoulders, as pious souls no doubt beseeched their ethereal master for the blessing of the greatest god-machine waking once more.

The Titan's clawed feet were tiered stairs leading into the armoured chambers of its lower legs. With the immense structure still unmoving, Grimaldus made his way through scores of scurrying menial tech-priests and servitors. As his booted foot thudded down on the first stair layer, the resistant welcome he was expecting finally made itself known.

'Hold,' he said to his brothers. Troops, their features covered, filed from the archways into the Titan's limb-innards. The knights' attempted entrance was blocked by Mechanicus minions.

The soldiers facing them were called skitarii. These were the elite of the Adeptus Mechanicus infantry forces – a fusion of integrated weapon augmetics and the human form. Grimaldus, like many Adeptus Astartes, regarded their unsubtle flesh-manipulation and the crude surgeries bestowing weapons upon their limbs as making them little more than glorified servitors, and equally wretched in their own way.

Twelve of these bionic creatures, their skin robed against the wind, levelled thrumming plasma weapons at the five knights.

'I am Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Black Tem–'

–*Your identity is known to us*– they all spoke at once. There was little unity in the chorus of voices, with some sounding unnaturally deep, others inhuman and mechanical, still others perfectly human.

'The next time I am interrupted,' the knight warned, 'I will kill one of you.'

–*We are not to be threatened*– all twelve said, still in unison, still in a chorus of unmatching voices.

‘Neither are you to be addressed. You are nothing; slaves, all of you, barely above servitors. Now move aside. I have business with your mistress.’

–We are not to be ordered into submission. We are to remain as duty demands–

A human would have missed the division within their unified speech, but Grimaldus’s senses could trace the minute deviations in the way they spoke. Four of them started and finished words a fraction of a second later than the others. Whatever mind-link bound the twelve warriors, it was more efficient in some than others. While his experience with the servants of the Machine-God was limited, he found this a curious flaw.

‘I will speak with the princeps majoris of Invigilata, even if I have to shout up to the cathedral itself.’

They had no orders pertaining to such an action, and lacked the cognition to make an assessment of how it would matter to their superiors, so they remained silent.

‘Reclusiarch…’ Priamus voxed. ‘Must we bear this foolish indignity?’

‘No.’ The skull helm scanned the skitarii each in turn, its red eyes unblinking. ‘Kill them.’

She floated, as she had floated for seventy-nine years, in a coffin-like tank of milky amniotic fluid. The metallic, chemical tang of the watery, oxygen-rich ooze had been the only constant in almost a century of life, and its taste, its feel, its intrusion into her lungs and its replacement of air in her respiration had never ceased to feel somewhat alien.

That was not to say she found it uncomfortable. Quite the opposite. It was forever unsettling, but not unnatural.

In moments of battle, which always seemed too few and far between, Princeps Majoris Zarha believed with cold certainty that this was what gestation within the womb must have felt like. The cooling fluid supporting her would become warm in sympathy with the plasma reactor at *Stormherald*’s core. The pounding, world-shaking tread echoed around her, magnified like the beat of a mighty heart.

A feeling of absolute power coupled with being utterly protected. It was all she needed to focus on to remain herself in those frantic, bladed moments when *Stormherald*’s broken, violent mind knifed into her consciousness

with sudden strength, seeking to overpower her.

She knew that there would come a day when her assistants unplugged her for the last time – when she would be denied a return to the machine's soul, for fear its ingrained temperament and personality would swallow her weaker, too-human sense of identity.

But that was not now. Not today.

No, Zarha focused on her simulated regression to the womb, and it was all she ever needed to push aside the clinging insistency of *Stormherald*'s blunt and primal advances.

Voices from the outside always reached her with a muffled dullness, despite the vox-receivers implanted where the cartilage of her inner ears once were, and the receptors built into the sides of her confinement tank.

They spoke, those voices, of intrusion.

Princeps Majoris Zarha did not share their appraisal of the situation. She turned in her milky fluid, as graceful as a sea-nymph from the tales of the impious Ancient Terra, though the augmented, wrinkled, hairless creature within the spacious coffin was anything but lovely. Her feet had been removed, for she would never need them again. Her bones were weak and soft, and her body curled and hunched.

She replied to them, to her minions and brothers and sisters, with a stab of thought.

I wish to speak with the intruders.

'I wish to speak with the intruders,' the vox-emitters on her coffin droned in a toneless echo of her silent words.

One of them came closer to the clear walls of her amniotic chamber, looking in at the floating husk with great respect.

'My princeps,' it was Lonn speaking, and though she liked Lonn, he was not her favourite.

Hello, Lonn. Where is Valian?

'Hello, Lonn. Where is Valian?'

'Moderati Carsomir is returning from the hive, my princeps. We thought you would still sleep for some time.'

With all this noise? What was left of her face turned into a smile.

'With all this noise?'

'My princeps, Adeptus Astartes are seeking to gain entrance.'

I heard.

‘I heard.’

I know.

‘I know.’

‘Your orders, my princeps?’

She twisted in the water again, in her own way as graceful as a seaborne mammal, despite the cables, wires and cords running from the coffin’s mechanical generators into her spine, skull and limbs. She was an ancient, withered marionette in the water, serene and smiling.

Access granted.

‘Access granted.’

–*Access granted*– said twelve voices at once.

The crackling edge of the maul remained motionless, no more than a finger’s thickness above the lead skitarii’s skull. A small spark of electrical force snapped at the soldier’s face from the armed power weapon, forcing him to recoil.

–*Access granted*– they all intoned a second time.

Grimaldus deactivated his crozius hammer and shoved the augmented human soldiers aside.

‘That is what I thought you would say.’

The journey was short and uneventful, through narrow corridors and ascending in elevator shafts, until they stood outside the sealed bulkhead doors of the bridge. The process of reaching the control deck involved a great deal of silently staring tech-adepts, their green-lens replacement eyes rotating and refocusing, either scanning or in some eerie mimicry of human facial expressions.

The interior of the Titan was dark, too dark for unaugmented humans to work by, lit by the kind of emergency-red lighting the knights had only seen before in bunkers and ships at war. Their gene-enhanced eyes would have pierced the gloom with ease, even without the vision filters of their helm’s visors.

No guards stood outside the large double bulkhead leading onto the command deck, and the doors themselves slid open on clunking rails as the knights waited.

Artarion gripped Grimaldus’s scroll-draped pauldron.

‘Make this count, brother.’

The Chaplain looked at the bearer of his war banner through the silver face of his slain master.

‘Trust me.’

The command deck was a circular bay, with a raised dais in the centre surrounded by five ornate and heavily-cabled thrones. At the edges of the chamber, robed tech-adepts worked at consoles filled with a dizzying array of levers, dials and buttons.

Two vast windows offered a grand view across the harsh landscape. With a shiver of realisation, Grimaldus knew he was looking out from the god-machine’s eyes.

Upon the dais itself, a huge, clear-glass tank stood supported by humming machinery. Within its milky depths floated a naked crone, ravaged by her years and the bionics necessary to sustain her life under such conditions. She stared through bug-eyed augmetic replacements where her human eyes once were.

‘Greetings, Adeptus Astartes,’ the vox-speakers built into her coffin spoke.

‘Princeps Majoris,’ Grimaldus nodded to the swimming husk. ‘An honour to stand in your presence.’

There was a distinct pause before she replied, though her gaze never left him. **‘You are keen to speak with me. Waste no time on pleasantries. *Stormherald* wakes, and soon I must walk. Speak.’**

‘I am told by one of this Titan’s pilots, as an ambassador to Helsreach, that Invigilata may not walk in our defence.’

Again, the pause.

‘This is so. I command one-third of this Legio. The rest already walks in defence of the Hemlock region, many with your brothers, the Salamanders. Do you come to petition me for my portion of mighty Invigilata?’

‘I do not beg, princeps. I came to see you with my own eyes and ask you, face to face, to fight and die with us.’

The withered woman smiled, the expression both maternal and amused.

‘But you have not yet completed your intended duty, Adeptus Astartes.’

‘Is that so?’

This time, the pause was longer. The old woman laughed within her bubbling tank. **‘We are not face to face.’**

The knight reached up to his armoured collar, disengaging the seals there.

Without my helm, the scent of sacred oils and the chemical-rich tang of her amniotic tank are much stronger. The first thing she says to me is something I am not sure how to respond to.

‘You have very kind eyes.’

Her own eyes are long-removed from her skull, the sockets covered by these bulbous lenses that twist as she watches me. I cannot return the comment she made, and I do not know what else I could say.

So I say nothing.

‘What is your name?’

‘Grimaldus of the Black Templars.’

‘Now we are face to face, Grimaldus of the Black Templars. You have been bold enough to come here, and honour me with your face. I am no fool. I know how rare it is for a Chaplain to reveal his human features to one not of his brotherhood. Ask what you came to ask, and I will answer.’

I step closer and press my palm against the casket’s surface. The vibration is twinned with that of my armour. I can feel the eyes of the Mechanicus minions upon me, upon my dark ceramite, their reverent gazes showing their longing to touch the perfection of the machinesmith’s craft represented by Adeptus Astartes war-plate.

And I look into the mechanical eyes of the princeps as she floats in the milky waters.

‘Princeps Zarha. Helsreach calls for you. Will you walk?’

She smiles again, a blind grandmother with rotten teeth, as she presses her own palm against mine. Only the reinforced glass separates us.

‘Invigilata will walk.’

Seven hours later, the people of the city heard a distant mechanical howl from the wastelands, eclipsing the cries of the lesser Titans. It echoed through the streets and around the spiretops, chilling the blood of every soul in the hive. Street dogs barked in response, as if sensing a larger predator

nearby.

Colonel Sarren shivered, though he smiled at the others in his command meeting. Through bloodshot eyes, heavy with sleeplessness, he regarded them all.

'*Stormherald* has awoken,' he said.

Three days, just as promised, and the city shook with the tread of the god-machines.

Invigilata's engines walked, and the great gates in the northern wall rumbled open to welcome them. Grimaldus and the hive's command staff watched from atop the viewing platform. The knight blink-clicked a rune on his retinal display, accessing a coded channel.

'Good morning, princeps,' he said softly. 'Welcome to Helsreach.'

In the distance, a walking cathedral-fortress pounded its slow, stately way through the first city blocks.

'Hail, Chaplain.' The crone's voice was laden with barely-contained energy. **'I was born in a hive like this, you know.'**

'It is fitting then, that you'll be dying here, Zarha.'

'Do you say so, sir knight? Have you seen me today?'

Grimaldus watched the distant form of *Stormherald*, as tall as the towers surrounding it.

'It is impossible not to see you, princeps.'

'It's impossible to kill me, as well. Remember that, Grimaldus.'

No human had ever dared use his name so informally before. The knight smiled for the first time in days.

The city was finally sealed. Helsreach was ready.

And as night fell, the sky caught fire.

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CHAPTER V

FIRE IN THE SKY

Its name had been, in nobler years, *The Purest Intent.*

A strike cruiser, constructed on the minor forge world Shevilar and granted to the Shadow Wolves Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. It had been lost with all hands, captured by xenos raiders, thirty-two years before the Third War for Armageddon.

When a huge and shapeless amalgamation of scrap and flame came burning through the cloud cover above the fortified city, warning sirens sounded once more across the hive. The squadron of fighters in the air – commanded by Korten Barasath – voxed their inability to engage. The hulk was burning up already, and far out of their capability to damage with their Lightnings' lascannons and long-barrelled autocannons.

The wing of fighters broke away as the hulk burned through the sky.

Thousands of soldiers manning the immense walls watched as the wreckage blazed its way overhead. The air itself shook with its passage, a palpable tremor from the thrum of overworked, dying engines.

Exactly eighteen seconds after it cleared the city walls, *The Purest Intent* ended its spaceborne life as it ploughed a new scar into Armageddon's war-torn face. All of Helsreach shook to its foundations as the massive cruiser hammered into the ground and carved a blackened canyon in its wake.

It took a further two minutes for the crippling damage inflicted by the impact to kill the immense, howling engines. Several booster rings still roared gaseous plasma and fire as they tried to propel the vessel through the stars, unaware it was half-buried in the stinging sulphuric sands that would be its grave.

But the engines failed.

The flames cooled.

At last, there was silence.

The Purest Intent was dead, its bones strewn across the wastelands of Armageddon.

‘The ship registers as *The Purest Intent*,’ Colonel Sarren read out from the data-slate to the crowded war room. ‘An Adeptus Astartes vessel, strike cruiser-class, belonging to the–’

‘Shadow Wolves,’ Grimaldus cut him off. The knight’s vox-voice was harsh and mechanical, betraying no emotion. ‘The Black Templars were with them at the end.’

‘The end?’ asked Cyria Tyro.

‘They fell at the Battle of Varadon eleven years ago. Their last companies were annihilated by the tyranid-breed xenos.’

Grimaldus closed his eyes and relished the momentary drift of focus into memory. *Varadon*. Blood of Dorn, it had been beautiful. No purer war had ever been fought. The enemy was endless, soulless, merciless… utterly alien, utterly hated, utterly without right to exist.

The knights had tried to fight their way to join up with the last of their brother Chapter, but the enemy tide was unrelenting in its ferocity. The aliens were viciously cunning, their swarming tides of claws and flesh-hooked appendages smashing into the two Adeptus Astartes forces and keeping them isolated from each other. The Wolves were there in full force. Varadon was their home world. Distress calls had been screamed into the warp by astropaths weeks before, when their fortress-monastery fell to the enemy.

Grimaldus had been there at the very end. The last handful of Wolves, their blades broken and their bolters empty, had intoned the Litanies of Hate into the vox-channel they shared with the Black Templars. Such a death! They chanted their bitter fury at the foes even as they were slain. Grimaldus would never, *could* never, forget the Chapter’s final moment. A lone warrior, a mere battle-brother, horrendously wounded and on his knees beneath the Chapter’s standard, keeping the banner proud and upright even as the xenos creatures tore into him.

The war banner would never be allowed to fall while one of the Wolves

yet lived.

Such a moment. Such honour. Such *glory*, to inspire warriors to remember your deeds for the rest of their own lives, and to fight harder in the hopes of matching such a beautiful death.

Grimaldus breathed out, restoring his senses to the present with irritated reluctance. How filthy this war would be by comparison.

Sarren continued. ‘The latest report from the fleet lists thirty-seven enemy ships have breached the blockade. Thirty-one were annihilated by the orbital defence array. Six have crashed onto the surface.’

‘What is the status of Battlefleet Armageddon?’ the knight asked.

‘Holding. But we have a greater comprehension of enemy numbers now. The four to nine day estimate has been abandoned, as of thirty minutes ago. This is the greatest greenskin fleet ever to face the Imperium. The fleet’s casualties are approaching a million souls. One or two more days, at best.’

‘Throne of the Emperor,’ one of the militia colonels swore in a whisper.

‘Focus,’ Grimaldus warned. ‘The crashed ship.’

Here, the colonel paused and gestured to Grimaldus. ‘I suggest we hold, Reclusiarch. A handful of greenskin survivors cannot hope to survive an assault against the walls. They would be insane – even for orks – to try.’

‘We are comfortable letting these survivors add their numbers to their brethren when the enemy’s main forces make planetfall?’ This, from Cyria Tyro.

‘A handful of additional foes will make no difference,’ Sarren pointed out. ‘We all saw the *Intent* hit. Not many of its crew are walking away from that.’

‘I have fought the greenskins before, sir,’ Major Ryken put in. ‘They’re tougher than a marsh lizard’s hide. Almost unbreakable. There’ll be plenty who survived that crash, I promise you.’

‘Send a Titan,’ Commissar Falkov smiled without any humour whatsoever, and the room fell quiet. ‘I am not making a jest. Send a Titan to obliterate the wreckage. Inspire the men. Give them an overwhelming victory before the true battle is even joined. Morale among the Steel Legion is mediocre at best. It is lower still among the volunteer militia, and barely existent among the conscripts. So send a Titan. We need first blood in this war.’

‘At least get Barasath’s fighters to scan for life readings,’ Tyro added, ‘before we commit to sending any troops outside the city.’

Throughout all of this, Grimaldus had remained silent. It was his silence that eventually killed all talk, and had faces turning towards him.

The knight rose to his feet. Despite the slowness of his movement, his armour's joints emitted a low snarl.

'The commissar is correct,' he said. 'Helsreach needs an overwhelming victory. The benefit to morale among the human forces would be considerable.'

Sarren swallowed. No one around the table enjoyed Grimaldus pointing out the difference in species between the humans and the genetically-forged Adeptus Astartes.

'It is time my knights took to the field,' the Reclusiarch said, his deep, soft voice coming out from his skull helm as a machine-growl. 'The humans may need first blood, but my knights hunger for it. We will give you your victory.'

'How many of your Adeptus Astartes will you take?' Sarren asked after a moment's thought.

'All of them.'

The colonel paled. 'But surely you don't need–'

'Of course not. But this is for appearances. You wanted an overwhelming display of Imperial force. I am giving you that.'

'We can make this even better,' Cyria said. 'If you can have your men stand in formation before they move out of the city, long enough for us to arrange live pict-feeds to all visual terminals across Helsreach…' She trailed off, a pleased smile brightening her features.

Falkov slammed a fist on the table. 'Let's get started. The first charge of the black knights!' He smiled a thin, nasty grin. 'If that doesn't light a fire in the heart of every man breathing, nothing will.'

Priamus twisted the blade, widening the wound before wrenching the sword clear. Stinking blood gushed from the creature's chest, and the alien died with its filthy claws scratching at the knight's armour.

Within the crashed ship, stalking from room to room, corridor by corridor, the Templars hunted mongrels in the name of purification.

'This is bad comedy,' he breathed into the vox.

The reply he received was punctuated by the dull clang of weapons clashing together. Artarion, some way behind.

‘Fall back, damn it.’

Priamus sensed another lecture about vainglory in his future. He walked on, his precious blade held at the ready, moving deeper into the darkness that his red visor pierced with consummate ease.

Like vermin, the orks scrambled through the tunnels of the wrecked ship, springing ambushes with their crude weapons and snorting their piggish war cries. Priamus’s contempt burned hot on his tongue. They were above this. They were Black Templars, and the morale of the puling humans was none of their concern.

Grimaldus was spending too much time among the mortals. The Reclusiarch was beginning to think like them. It had galled Priamus to stand in ranked formation for the pict-drones to hover around and capture the knights’ images, just as it galled him now to hunt the scarce survivors of this wreck. It was beneath him, beneath them all. This was work for the Imperial Guard. Perhaps even the militia.

‘We will draw first blood,’ Grimaldus had said to them all, as if it were something to care about – as if it would affect the final battle in any way at all. ‘Join me, brothers. Join me as I shake off this disgust at the stasis gripping my bones, and slake my bloodthirst in holy slaughter.’

The others, as they stood in their foolish ranks for the benefit of the mortals, had cheered. They had *cheered*.

Priamus remained silent, swallowing the rise of bile in his throat. He had known in that moment, with clarity sharper than ever before, that he was unlike his brothers. They *cared* about shedding blood now, as if this pathetic gesture mattered.

These warriors who called him vainglorious were blind to the truth: there was nothing vain in glory. He was not rash, he merely trusted in his skills to carry him through any challenge, just as the great Sigismund, First High Marshal of the Black Templars, had trusted his skills to do the same. Was that a weakness? Was it a flaw to exemplify the fury of the Chapter’s founder and the favoured son of Rogal Dorn? How could it be considered so, when Priamus’s deeds and glories were already rising to eclipse those of his brothers?

Movement ahead.

Priamus narrowed his eyes, his pupils flicking across his field of vision to lock targeting reticules on the brutish shapes swarming in the darkness of

the wide, lightless corridor.

Three greenskins, their xenos flesh exuding a greasy, fungal scent that reached the knight from a dozen metres away. They lay waiting in a puerile ambush, believing themselves hidden by fallen gantries and a half-destroyed bulkhead door.

Priamus heard them grunting to one another in what passed for whispers in their foul tongue.

This was the best they could do. *This* was their cunning ambush against warriors made in the Emperor's image. The knight swore under his breath, the curse never leaving his helm, and charged.

Artarion licks his steel teeth. I hear him doing it, even though he wears his helm.

'Priamus?' he asks. The vox answers with silence.

Unlike the swordsman, I am not alone. I walk with Artarion, the two of us slaying our way through the enginarium decks. Resistance is light. Most of our venture so far has consisted of kicking xenos corpses out of our path, or butchering lone stragglers.

Most of the Templars were sent across the wastelands in their Rhinos and Land Raiders, chasing down the crash survivors who sought to hide in the wilderness. I have given them their head, and let them hunt. Better the greenskins die now, rather than allow them to lie in wait and rejoin their bestial kin in the true invasion. I took only a handful of warriors into the downed cruiser to purge whatever remains.

'Leave him be,' I say to Artarion. 'Let him hunt. He needs to stand alone for now.'

Artarion pauses before answering. I know him well enough to know he is scowling. 'He needs discipline.'

'He needs our trust.' My tone brooks no further argument.

The ship is in pieces. The floor is uneven, torn and wrenched from the crash. We turn a corner, our boots clinging to the sloping decking as we head into a plasma generator's coolant chamber. As huge as a cathedral's prayer chamber, the expansive room is largely taken up by the cylindrical metal housing that encases the temperamental and arcane technology used for cooling the ship's engines.

I see nothing alive. I hear nothing alive. And yet…

‘I smell fresh blood,’ I vox to Artarion. ‘A survivor, still bleeding.’ I gesture to the vast coolant tower with my crozius. The mace flashes with lightning as I squeeze the trigger rune. ‘The alien lurks beneath there.’

The survivor is barely deserving of the description. It lies pinned under metal debris, impaled through the stomach and pinned to the floor. As we approach, it barks in its rudimentary command of the Gothic tongue. Judging from the pool of cooling blood spreading from its sundered form, the alien’s life will end in mere minutes. Feral red eyes glare at us. Its porcine face is curled in a rictus of anger.

Artarion raises his chainsword, gunning the motor. The saw-teeth whine as they cut through the air.

‘No.’

Artarion freezes. At first, my brother knight isn’t sure what he’d heard. His glance flicks to me.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said,’ I’m stepping closer to the dying alien even as I speak, looking down through my skulled mask, ‘…no.’

Artarion lowers his sword. Its teeth stutter to a halt.

‘They always seem so immune to pain,’ I tell him, and I feel my voice fall to a whisper. I place a boot upon the creature’s bleeding chest. The ork snaps its jaws at me, choking on the blood that runs into its burst lungs.

Artarion must surely hear the smile in my voice. ‘But no. Look into its eyes, brother.’

Artarion complies. I can tell from his hesitation that he does not see what I see. He looks down and sees nothing but impotent rage.

‘I see fury,’ he tells me. ‘Frustration. Not even hatred. Just wrath.’

‘Then look harder.’ I press down with my boot. Ribs crunch with the sound of dry twigs snapping, one after the other, as the weight descends harder. The ork bellows, drooling and snarling.

‘Do you see?’ I ask, knowing the smile is still evident in my voice.

‘No, brother,’ Artarion grunts. ‘If there is a lesson in this, I am blind to it.’

I lift the boot, letting the ork cough its lifeblood through its blood-streaked maw.

‘I see it in the creature’s eyes. Defeat is pain. Its nerves may be dead to torment, but whatever passes for its soul knows how to suffer. To be at an enemy’s mercy… Look at its face, brother. See how it dies in agony

because we are here to watch such a shameful end.’

Artarion watches, and I think perhaps he sees it, as well. However, it does not fascinate him the way it does me. ‘Let me end it,’ he says. ‘Its existence offends me.’

I shake my head. That would not do at all.

‘No. Its life’s span is measured in moments.’ I feel the dying alien’s gaze lock with my red eye lenses. ‘Let it die in this pain.’

Nerovar hesitated.

‘Nero?’ Cador called over his shoulder. ‘Do you see something?’

The Apothecary blink-clicked several visualiser runes on his retinal display.

‘Yes. Something.’

The two of them were searching the ruined enginarium chambers on the level beneath Grimaldus and Artarion. Nerovar frowned at what the digital readouts across his eye lenses were telling him. He looked to the bulky narthecium unit built into his left bracer.

‘So enlighten me,’ Cador said, his voice as gruff as always.

Nerovar tapped a code into the multicoloured buttons next to the display screen on his armoured forearm. Runic text scrolled in a blur.

‘It’s Priamus.’

Cador grunted in agreement. Nothing but trouble, that one. ‘Isn’t it always?’

‘I’ve lost his life signs.’

‘That cannot be,’ Cador laughed. ‘Here? Among this rabble?’

‘I do not make mistakes,’ Nerovar replied. He activated the squad’s shared channel. ‘Reclusiarch?’

‘Speak.’ The Chaplain sounded distracted, and faintly amused. ‘What is it?’

‘I’ve lost Priamus’s life signs, sir. No heightened returns, just an immediate severance.’

‘Confirm at once.’

‘Confirmed, Reclusiarch. I verified it before contacting you.’

‘Brothers,’ the Chaplain said, his voice suddenly ice. ‘Maintain search and destroy orders.’

‘What?’ Artarion drew breath to object. ‘We need–’

‘Be silent. *I* will find Priamus.’

He wasn’t sure what they hit him with.

The greenskins had melted from their hiding places in the darkness, one of them carrying a weighty amalgamation of scrap that only loosely resembled a weapon. Priamus had slain one, laughing at its porcine snorting as it fell to the deck, and launched at the next.

The scrap-weapon bucked in the greenskin’s hands. A claw of charged, crackling metal fired from the alien device and crunched into the knight’s chest. There was a moment of stinging pain as his suit’s interface tendrils, the connection spikes lodged in his muscles and bones, crackled with an overload of power.

Then his vision went black. His armour fell silent, and became heavier on his shoulders and limbs. Out of power. They’d deactivated his armour.

‘Dorn’s blood…’

Priamus tore his helm clear just in time to see the alien racking his scrap-weapon like a primitive solid-slug launcher. The claw embedded in his chest armour, defiling the Templar cross there, was still connected to the device by a cable of chains and wires. Priamus raised his blade to sever the bond even as the alien laughed and pulled a second trigger.

This time, the channelled force didn’t just overload his armour’s electrical systems. It burned through the neural connections and muscle interfaces, blasting agony through the swordsman’s body.

Priamus, gene-forged like all Adeptus Astartes to tolerate any pain the enemies of mankind could inflict upon him, would have screamed if he could. His muscles locked, his teeth clamped together, and his attempt to cry out left his clenched jaw as an ululating, shuddering *‘Hnn-hnn-hnn’*.

Priamus crashed to the ground fourteen seconds later, when the agony finally ceased.

The greenskins hunch over his prone form.

Now they have managed to bring him down, they seem to have no idea what to do with their prize. One of them turns my brother’s black helm over in its fat-knuckled hands. If it means to turn Priamus’s armour into a trophy, it is about to pay for such blasphemy.

As I walk down the darkened corridor, I drag my mace along the wall – the

ornate head clangs against the steel arches. I have no wish to be subtle.

'Greetings.' I breathe the word from my skulled face.

They raise their hideous alien faces, their jaws slack and filled with rows of grinding teeth. One of them hefts a heavy composite of detritus and debris that apparently serves as a weapon.

It fires… something… at me. I do not care what. It's smashed from the air with a single swing of my inactive maul. The clang of metal on metal echoes throughout the corridor, and I thumb the trigger rune on the haft of my crozius. The mace flares into crackling life as I aim it at the aliens.

'You dare exist in humanity's domain? You dare spread your cancerous touch to our worlds?'

They do not answer this challenge with words. Instead, they come at me in a lumbering run, raising cleaver swords; primitive weapons to suit primitive beings.

I am laughing when they reach me.

Grimaldus swung his mace two-handed, pounding the first alien back. The sparking force field around the weapon's head flashed as it reacted with opposing kinetic force, and amplified the already inhuman strike to insane levels of strength. The greenskin was already dead, its skull obliterated, as it flew twenty metres back down the corridor to smash into a damaged bulkhead.

The second tried to flee. It turned its back and ran, hunched and ape-like, back in the direction it had come.

Grimaldus was faster. He caught the creature in a handful of heartbeats, hooked his gauntleted fingers in the ork's armoured collar to halt its flight, and smashed it against the corridor wall.

The alien grunted a stream of curses in Gothic as it struggled in the knight's grip.

Grimaldus clutched at the creature's throat, black gauntlets squeezing, choking, crunching bone beneath his grip.

'You *dare* defile the language of the pure race…' He slammed the alien back, breaking its head open on the steel wall behind. Foetid breath steamed across Grimaldus's faceplate as the ork's attempt to roar came out as a panicked whine. The Adeptus Astartes would not be appeased. His grip tightened.

‘You dare desecrate our tongue?’

Again, he bashed the greenskin back, the alien’s head splitting wide as it struck a girder.

The ork’s struggles died immediately. Grimaldus let the creature fall to the metal decking, where it hit and folded with a muffled thud.

Priamus.

The fury was fading now. Reality asserted itself with cold, unwanted clarity. Priamus lay on the deck, head to the side, bleeding from his ears and open mouth. Grimaldus came to his side, kneeling there in the darkness.

‘Nero,’ he said quietly.

‘Reclusiarch,’ the younger knight returned.

‘I have found Priamus. Aft, deck four, tertiary spine corridor.’

‘On my way. Assessment?’

Grimaldus’s targeting reticule flicked over his brother’s prone body, then locked on to the scrap-weapon carried by the orks he’d killed.

‘Some kind of force-discharging weapon. His armour is powered down, but he’s still breathing. Both his hearts are beating.’ This last part was the most serious aspect of the downed knight’s condition. If his reserve heart had begun to beat, there must have been significant trauma done to Priamus’s body.

‘Three minutes, Reclusiarch.’ There was the dampened suggestion of bolter fire.

‘Resistance, Cador?’ Grimaldus asked.

‘Nothing of consequence.’

‘Stragglers,’ Nerovar clarified. ‘Three minutes, Reclusiarch. No more than that.’

It was closer to two minutes. When Nerovar and Cador arrived at a run, they smelled of the chemical combat stimulants in their blood and the acrid tang of discharged bolters.

The Apothecary knelt by Priamus, scanning his fallen brother with the medical auspex bio-scanner built into his arm-mounted narthecium.

Grimaldus looked at Cador. The oldest member of the squad was reloading his bolt pistol, and muttering into the vox.

‘Speak,’ the Chaplain said. ‘I would hear your thoughts.’

‘Nothing, sir.’

Grimaldus felt his eyes narrow and teeth grind together. He almost repeated his words as an order. What held him back was not tact, but discipline. His rage still boiled beneath the surface. He was no mere knight, to give in to his emotion and remain flooded by it. As a Chaplain, he held himself to a higher standard. Putting the chill of normality into his voice, he said simply:

'We will speak of this later. I am not blind to your tensions of late.'

'As you wish, Reclusiarch,' Cador replied.

Priamus opened his eyes, and did two things at once. He reached for his sword – still chained to his wrist – and he said through tight lips, 'Those whoresons. They shot me.'

'Some kind of nerve weapon.' Nerovar was still scanning him. 'It attacked your nervous system through the interface feeds from your armour.'

'Get away from me,' the swordsman said, rising to his feet. Nerovar offered a hand, which Priamus knocked aside. 'I said *get away*.'

Grimaldus handed the knight his helm.

'If you are finished with your lone reconnaissance, perhaps you can stay with Nero and Cador this time.'

The pause that followed the Chaplain's words was pregnant with Priamus's bitterness.

'As you wish. My lord.'

When we emerge from the wrecked ship, the weak sun is rising, spreading its worthlessly dim light across the clouded heavens.

The rest of my force, the hundred knights of the Helsreach Crusade, is assembling in the wastelands around the broken ship's metal bones.

Three Land Raiders, six Rhinos, the air around them all thrumming with the chuckle of idling engines. I think, for a strange moment, that even our tanks are amused at the pathetic hunting on offer last night.

Kill-totals scroll across my visor display as squad leaders report the success of their hunts. A paltry night's work, all in all, but the mortals behind the city walls have the first blood they so ardently desired.

'You're not cheering,' Artarion voxes to me, and only me.

'Little was cleansed. Little was purified.'

'Duty is not always glorious,' he says, and I wonder if he refers to our exile on the planet's surface with those words.

‘I presume that is a barbed reference for my benefit?’

‘Perhaps.’ He clambers aboard our Land Raider, still speaking from within. ‘Brother, you have changed since inheriting Mordred’s mantle.’

‘You are speaking foolishness.’

‘No. Hear me. We have spoken: Cador, Nero, Bastilan, Priamus and myself. And we have listened to the talk among the others. We must all deal with these changes, and we must all face this duty. Your darkness is spreading to the entire Crusade. One hundred warriors all fearing that the fire in your heart is naught but embers now.’

And for a moment, his words ring true. My blood runs cold. My heart chills in my chest.

‘Reclusiarch,’ a voice crackles over the vox. I do not immediately recognise it – Artarion’s words have stolen my thoughts.

‘Grimaldus. Speak.’

‘Reclusiarch. Throne of the God-Emperor… It’s truly beginning.’ Colonel Sarren sounds awed, almost eager.

‘Elaborate,’ I tell him.

‘Battlefleet Armageddon is in full retreat. The Adeptus Astartes fleet is withdrawing alongside them.’ The colonel’s voice breaks up in a storm of vox-feedback, only to return a moment later. ‘…breaking against the orbital defence array. Breaking *through*, already. It’s beginning.’

‘We are returning to the city at once. Has there been any communication from *The Eternal Crusader*?’

‘Yes. The planetary vox-network is struggling to cope with the influx. Shall I have the message relayed to you?’

‘At once, colonel.’

I embark and slam the Land Raider’s side hatch closed. Within the tank, all is suffused in the muted darkness of emergency lighting. I stand with my squad, gripping the overhead rail as the tank starts with a lurch.

At last, after the vox-clicking of several channels being linked together, I hear the words of High Marshal Helbrecht, the brother I have fought beside for so many decades. His voice, even on a low-quality recording, is filled with his presence.

‘Helsreach, this is the *Crusader.* We are breaking from the planet. The orbital war is lost. Repeat: the orbital war is lost. Grimaldus… Once you hear these words, stand ready. You are Mordred’s heir, and my trust rides

with you. Hell is coming, brother. The Great Enemy's fleet is without number, but faith and fury will see your duty done.'

I curse him, without giving voice to my spite. A silent oath that I will never forgive him for this exile… For damning me to die in futility.

Behind his words, I hear the cacophony of a ship enduring colossal assault. Dull explosions, horrendous and thunderous shaking – *The Eternal Crusader*'s shields were down when he sent me this message. I cannot conceive of any enemy in history that has managed to inflict such damage to our flagship.

'Grimaldus,' he says my name with cold, raw solemnity, and his final words knife into me like a bitter blade.

'Die well.'

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CHAPTER VI

PLANETFALL

Grimaldus watched Helsreach erupting in fury.

They came through the morning clouds, fat-bellied troop landers that streaked with fire from atmospheric entry and the damage they had sustained breaking through the orbital defences.

Burning hulks juddered as their boosters fired, slowing them before they ploughed into the ground. They came from the horizon, or descended from stretches of cloud cover far from the city. Those few that sailed overhead, close enough for the city's defence platforms to reach, were subjected to horrendous battery fire, destroyed with such swift force that flaming wreckage rained upon the city below.

He stood with his command squad, fists resting on the edge of the battlements, watching the bulk landers coming down in the northern wastelands. Imperial fighters of all classes and designs flitted between the sedate troop ships, unleashing their payloads to minimal effect. The ships were too big for fighter-scale weapons to make any significant difference. As more alien scrapships broke the poison-yellow cloud cover, xenos fighter craft descended with their motherships. Barasath and his Lightning squadrons engaged these, punching them out of the air like buzzing insects.

Across the city, almost drowned out by the booming rage of the battlement guns, a siren wailed between automated announcements that demanded every soul take up arms and man their appointed positions.

The walls.

During the opening phase, Helsreach's defenders would stand upon the city's walls and be ready to repel an archaic siege. Hundreds of thousands

of soldiers and militia, standing vigil on walls that were as tall as a Titan.

Several bold ork drop-ships sought to land within the city. Spiretop platforms, wall guns and cannon batteries mounted upon the tops of towers annihilated those that made the attempt. The luckier failures managed to climb with enough altitude to escape the city's reach and crash on the wastelands. Most were torn asunder by unrelenting weapons fire, pulled apart and cast to the ground in flames.

Guard units stationed throughout the hive and pre-selected for the duty moved in on the downed hulks, slaughtering any alien survivors. Across the city, fire containment teams worked to put out blazes that spread from the crashing junkers.

Grimaldus looked along the walls to either side, where thousands of uniformed men stood in loose groups, every one clad in the ochre of the Armageddon Steel Legion. These were not Sarren's own 101st. The colonel's regiment remained at the command centre, as well as being spread across the city in platoons to defend key areas.

Artarion's words still burned behind the Chaplain's eyes.

'Brothers,' he spoke into the vox. 'To me.'

The knights drew closer – Nerovar watching the distant landings without a word; Priamus, his blade already in his hands, resting on one pauldron; Cador, projecting a sense of implacable patience; Bastilan, grim and silent; and Artarion, holding Grimaldus's banner, the only one of them without his helmet. He seemed to enjoy the uncomfortable glances he received from the human soldiers as they saw his shattered face. Occasionally, he'd grin at them, baring his metal teeth.

'Helm on,' Grimaldus said, the words emerging from his vocaliser as a low growl. Artarion complied with a chuckle.

'We must speak,' Grimaldus said.

'You have chosen a curious moment to realise that,' Artarion said. The wall shivered beneath their feet again as the turrets unleashed another volley at an alien scrap-cruiser shaking the sky overhead.

'The city has awoken to its duty,' Grimaldus intoned. 'It is time I did the same.'

The knights stood and watched as xenos landers touched down on the plains several kilometres from the city. Even from this distance, the Templars could make out hordes of greenskins spilling from the grounded

ships, mustering on the wastelands.

Reports clashed with each other over the vox, telling of similar landings being made to the east and west of the city.

‘Speak,’ Grimaldus demanded in the face of his brothers’ silence.

‘What would you have us say, Reclusiarch?’ asked Bastilan.

‘The truth. Your perceptions of this doomed crusade, and the way it is being led.’

The ork ship that had passed overhead minutes before now came down in the wasteland with slow, grinding, earthshaking force. It ploughed into the dusty ground, throwing up a trail of dust in its wake, and Helsreach shook to its foundations.

A cheer went up along the wall – thousands of soldiers crying out at the sight.

‘We hold the largest city on the planet, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers,’ Cador said, ‘as well as countless experienced Guard and militia officers. And we have Invigilata.’

‘Your point?’ Grimaldus asked, watching the crashed ship burn. ‘Do you think that will be even half of what we would need to repel the siege that we’ll soon suffer?’

‘No,’ Cador replied. ‘We are going to die here, but that is not my point. My point, brother, is that the city has a command structure already in place.’

Bastilan pitched in. ‘You are not a general, Grimaldus. And you were not sent here to be one.’

Grimaldus nodded, his mind flashing back from the fire on the wastelands, snapping into recollections of the endless command staff meetings when the mortals had requested his presence.

He had thought it was his duty to be present, to grasp the full situation facing the hive. When he said these words to his brothers, he was answered with curses and smiles.

The Chaplain watched the greenskin swarm growing in size as more landers came down. The alien vessels darkened the sky, such was their number. Like steel beetles, they infested the wastelands in every direction, disgorging hosts of xenos warriors.

‘It *was* my duty to study every soul, every weapon, every metre of this hive. But I have erred, brothers. The High Marshal did not send me here to

command.’

‘We know,’ Artarion said softly, his skin tingling at the change in Grimaldus’s tone. He sounded almost himself again.

‘Until this moment, until I looked upon the enemy myself, I had not resigned myself to dying here. I was… enraged… with Helbrecht for damning me to this exile.’

‘As were we all,’ Priamus said, his voice rich with the sneer he wore on his face. ‘But we will carve a legend here, Reclusiarch. We will make the High Marshal remember the day he sent us here to die.’

Good words, Grimaldus thought. Fine words.

‘He will always recall that day. It is not he who must be forced to remember the Helsreach Crusade.’ The Chaplain nodded out to the massing army. ‘It is them.’

Grimaldus looked to his left, then his right. The Steel Legion stood in organised ranks, watching the mass of enemies coming together on the plains. When his own gaze returned to the foe, he couldn’t help a smile creeping its way across his features.

‘This is Grimaldus of the Black Templars,’ he voxed. ‘Colonel Sarren, answer me.’

‘I am here, Reclusiarch. Commander Barasath reports–’

‘Later, colonel. Later. I am looking at the enemy, tens of thousands, with more landing each moment. They will not wait for their wreck-Titans to be landed. These beasts are hungry for bloodshed. The first strike will come at the north wall, within the next two hours.’

‘With respect, Reclusiarch, how will they reach the wall without Titans to breach it?’

‘Propulsion packs to gain the battlements. Ladders to climb. Artillery to pound holes in the walls. They will do whatever they can, and as soon as they are able. These creatures have been imprisoned on bulk ships for weeks, and in some cases, months. Do not expect sense. Expect madness and rage.’

‘Understood. I will have Barasath’s squadrons ready for bombing runs on enemy artillery.’

‘I would have suggested the same, colonel. The gates, Sarren. We must watch the gates. A wall is only as strong as its weakest point, and they will come at the north gate with everything they have.’

‘Reinforcements are already being rerouted to–’

‘No.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘You heard me. I will not require reinforcement. I have fifteen of my knights with me, and an entire Steel Legion regiment. I will provide updates as the situation evolves.’ Grimaldus killed the vox-link before Sarren could argue more.

The Templar watched the enemy massing in the distance for several more minutes, listening to the chatter of the Guard soldiers nearby. The men around him wore the insignia of the 273rd Steel Legion. Their shoulder badges showed a black carrion bird, clutching the Imperial aquila in its claws.

The Reclusiarch closed his eyes, recalling the personnel data meetings he’d endured. The 273rd. The Desert Vultures. Their commanding officer was Colonel F. Nathett. His second officers were Major K. Johan, and Major V. Oros.

In the distance, a great cry was raised. It barely reached the defenders’ ears over the powerful refrain of wall-guns firing, but it was there nevertheless. Thousands upon thousands of orks bellowing their racial war cry.

They were charging.

Charging alongside grumbling, rickety vehicles: troop-carriers stolen from the Imperium and subsequently junked in the spirit of alien ‘improvement’; growling tanks that already lobbed shells that fell far short of the city walls; even great beasts of burden, the size of scout-class Titans, with scrap-metal howdahs on their rocking backs, filled with howling orks.

‘We have sixteen minutes before they reach the range of the wall-guns,’ Nerovar said. ‘Twenty-two before they reach the gates, if their rate of advance remains unaltered.’

Grimaldus opened his eyes, and took a breath. The humans were muttering amongst themselves, and even though they were trained veterans, Grimaldus’s gene-enhanced senses could scent the reek of sudden sweat and fear-soured breath through their respirators. No mortal could fail to be moved by the horde of devastation rumbling their way. Even without their greater war machines, the first ork assault was vast.

The city was ready. The enemy was coming. It was time to face up to why he was exiled here.

Grimaldus took a step up onto the battlements.

The wind was strong – an atmospheric disturbance from so many heavy craft making planetfall – but despite the powerful gale that whipped the greatcoats of the human soldiers, Grimaldus remained steady.

He walked along the edge of the wall, his weapons drawn and activated. The generator coils on the back of his plasma pistol burned with fierce light, and his crozius maul sparked with lethal force. As he moved, the eyes of the soldiers followed him. The wind tore at his tabard and the parchment scrolls fastened to his armour. He paid no heed to the anger of the elements.

'Do you see that?' he asked quietly.

At first, only silence followed. Hesitantly, the Guard soldiers began to cast glances to each other, uncomfortable with the Chaplain's presence and confused by his behaviour.

All eyes were on him now. Grimaldus aimed his mace out at the advancing hordes. Thousands. Tens of thousands. And only the very beginning.

'Do you see that?' he roared at the humans. The closest ranks flinched back from the mechanical bark that issued almost deafeningly loud from his skull helm.

'Answer me!'

He received several trembling nods. 'Yes, sir…' uttered a handful of them, the speakers faceless within the masses behind their rebreather masks.

Grimaldus turned back to the wasteland, already dark with the teeming, chaotic ranks of the enemy. At first, his helm emitted a low, vox-distorted chuckle. Within a few seconds, he was laughing, laughing up at the burning sky while aiming his crozius hammer at the enemy.

'Are you all as insulted as I am? *This* is what they send against us?'

He turned back to the men, the laughter fading, but amused contempt filling his voice even through the inhumanising vocalisers of his helm.

'This is what they send? This *rabble?* We hold one of the mightiest cities on the face of the planet. The fury of its guns sends all skyborne enemies to the ground in flames. We stand united in our thousands – our weapons without number, our purity without question, and our hearts beating courage through our blood. And *this* is how they attack us?

'Brothers and sisters… A legion of beggars and alien dregs wheezes its way across the plains. Forgive me when the moment comes that they whine and weep against our walls. Forgive me that I must order you to waste

ammunition upon their worthless bodies.’

Grimaldus paused, lowering his weapon at last, turning his back on the invaders as if bored by their very existence. His entire attention was focused upon the soldiers below him.

‘I have heard many souls speak my name in whispers since I came to Helsreach. I ask you now: Do you know me?’

‘Yes,’ several voices replied, several among the hundreds.

‘Do you know me?’ he bellowed at them over the firing of the wall-guns.

‘Yes!’ a chorus answered now.

‘I am Grimaldus of the Black Templars! A brother to the Steel Legions of this defiant world!’

A muted cheer greeted his words. It wasn’t enough, not even close.

‘Never again in life will your actions carry such consequence. Never again will you serve as you serve now. No duty will matter as much, and no glory will taste as true. We are the defenders of Helsreach. On this day, we carve our legend in the flesh of every alien we slay. Will you stand with me?’

Now the cheers came in truth. They thundered in the air around him.

‘Will you stand with me?’

Again, a roar.

‘Sons and daughters of the Imperium! Our blood is the blood of heroes and martyrs! The xenos dare defile our city? They dare tread the sacred soil of our world? We will throw their bodies from these walls when the final day dawns!’

A wave of noise crashed against his armour as they cheered. Grimaldus raised his war maul, aiming it to the embattled heavens.

‘This is *our* city! This is *our* world! Say it! *Say it! Cry it out so the bastards in orbit will hear our fury! Our city! Our world!’*

‘OUR CITY! OUR WORLD!’

Laughing again, Grimaldus turned to face the oncoming horde. *‘Run, alien dogs! Come to me! Come to us all! Come and die in blood and fire!’*

‘BLOOD AND FIRE!’

The Reclusiarch cut the air with his crozius, as if ordering his men forward. *‘For the Templars! For the Steel Legion! For Helsreach!’*

‘FOR HELSREACH!’

‘Louder!’

‘FOR HELSREACH!’

‘They cannot hear you, brothers!’

‘FOR HELSREACH!’

‘Hurl yourselves at these walls, inhuman filth! Die on our blades! I am Grimaldus of the Black Templars, and I will cast your carcasses from these holy walls!’

‘GRIMALDUS! GRIMALDUS! GRIMALDUS!’

Grimaldus nodded, still staring out over the wastelands, letting the cheering chant mix with the howling wind, knowing it would carry to the advancing enemy.

A vox-voice pulled him from his reverie. ‘That is the first time since we landed,’ said Artarion, ‘that you have sounded like yourself.’

‘We have a war to fight,’ the Chaplain replied. ‘The past is done with. Nero, how long?’

The Apothecary tilted his head, watching the horde for several moments.

‘Six minutes until they are within range of the wall-guns.’

Grimaldus stepped down from the edge of the wall, standing among the Guard. They backed away from him, even as they all still cheered his name.

‘Vultures!’ he called, ‘I must speak with Colonel Nathett, and Majors Oros and Johan. Where are your officers?’

A great deal can happen in six minutes, especially when one has the resources of a fortress-city to call upon.

Dozens of fighters in the gunmetal grey of the 5082nd Naval Skyborne streaked over the advancing horde, punishing them from above with strafing runs. Autocannons chattered, spitting into the tide of enemy flesh. Lascannons beamed with eye-aching brilliance, destroying dozens of the few heavy tanks present in this initial ork host.

Grimaldus stood upon the battlements, weapons in hands, watching Commander Barasath’s Lightnings and Thunderbolts unleashing devastation from the sky. He was a veteran of two hundred years. He knew, with cold clarity, when something was wasted effort.

Every death counts, he thought, seeking to force himself to believe it as the immense sea of foes came crashing closer.

Priamus was similarly unmoved. ‘Barasath’s best attempt is no more than spitting into a tidal wave.’

‘Every death counts,’ Grimaldus growled. ‘Every life lost out there is one

less enemy assailing our walls.’

A great beast, some kind of stomping mammoth covered in scales, cried out as it went down, lanced through its legs and belly by a volley of lascannon fire. The orks fell from the howdah on its back, vanishing into the swarm of warriors. Grimaldus prayed they were crushed underfoot by their allies.

On his retinal display, a runic countdown began to flicker red.

He raised his crozius.

Along the north wall, hundreds of multi-barrelled turrets began their realignment. On grinding joints, they cycled down to aim at the wastelands, leaving the city vulnerable from above.

Around each turret, a cluster of soldiers stood ready – loaders, sighters, vox-officers, adjutants, all ready for the order.

‘Wall-guns,’ Nero voxed to Grimaldus. ‘Wall-guns, now.’

Grimaldus sliced the air with his blazing maul, screaming a single word.

‘Fire!’

Craters appeared in the enemy horde. Huge explosions of dirt, scrap metal, bodies and gore erupted from the army. With the numbers facing them, the gunners on Helsreach’s walls couldn’t miss.

Thousands died in the first barrage. Thousands more came on.

‘Reload!’ a lone figure, armoured in black, shouted into the vox.

The walls themselves shook again, tremors pulsing through the rockcrete as the second volley fired. And the third. And the fourth. In a sane army, the annihilation inflicted upon them would be catastrophic. Entire legions would be breaking and running in fear.

The aliens, blood-maddened and howling their throaty war cries, didn’t even slow down. They ignored their dead, trampled their wounded, and crashed against the towering walls like a peal of thunder.

With nothing capable of breaching the metres-thick sealed gates in the northern wall, the berserk aliens began to climb.

I have always believed there is something beautiful in the very first moments of a battle. Here are the moments of highest emotion; the fear of mortal men, the frustrated bloodlust and screaming overconfidence of mankind’s enemies. In the moments when a battle is joined, the purity of

the human species is first revealed to the foe.

In organised union, the hundreds of Steel Legion soldiers step forward. They move like different limbs of the same being. Like a reflection stretching into infinity, every man and woman down the line aims their lasguns over the wall, down at the greenskins howling and clambering. The aliens drag themselves up by their own claws; they climb on ladders and poles; they boost up on the whining thrusters of jump packs.

And all of it so delightfully futile.

The *crack!* of thousands of lasguns discharging in a chorus is a strangely evocative song. It sings of discipline, defiance, strength and courage. More than that, it's a furious response – the first time the defenders can vent their rage at the invaders. Every soldier in the line squeezes their triggers, letting their lasrifles shout for them, spitting death down at the foe. Las-bolts tear into green flesh, ripping orks open, throwing them to the ground far below to be pulped under the boots of their kin.

Barasath's fighters streak overhead, their weapons still stuttering into the massed horde. Their targets have changed – more often than not, they rain their viciousness upon the artillery tanks that were unloaded last from the landers, and are only now catching up to the back to the besieging army.

I watch as the first of our fighters is brought down. Anti-air fire rattles up from a junked Hydra, its two remaining turrets tracking a group of Lightnings. The explosion is almost ignorable – a crumpled pop of fuel tanks detonating, and the protests of engines as the fighter spirals down.

It impacts in a burning wreck, wings shorn off, spinning and crashing through the ranks of the enemy. Some might consider it tragic that the pilot likely killed more of the enemy with his death than he did in life. I care only that more of the invaders are dead.

The first of the enemy to gain the ramparts does so alone. A hundred metres and more down the wall, a lone ork crashes down with his back-mounted propulsion pack streaming smoky fire. The others that were with him are either dead or dying, falling from their ascent as their bodies and thruster fuel tanks are riddled with las-fire. The one alien that touches down on the wall lasts less than a heartbeat. The creature is bayoneted in the throat, the eye, the chest and both legs by half a dozen soldiers, and their rifles blast the beast back over the edge.

First blood to Helsreach.

The minutes became hours.

The orks hurled themselves against the walls, still lacking any ability to secure a hold there, clambering up the hulls of wrecked tanks, mounds of their own dead, and ladders of twisted metal in a vain effort to reach the battlements.

Word was filtering through the wall commanders now; the east and west walls were enduring similar sieges. In the wasteland around the city, more landers were making planetfall, unloading fresh warriors and legions of tanks. While plenty of these new forces committed themselves immediately to the first attack already in progress, many more remained far from the city, making camps, clearing more landing zones and organising for a far more coordinated assault in the future.

The hive's defenders could make out individual banners among the ork swarm – clans and tribes united under the Great Enemy – many of which were now holding back rather than hurling themselves into this first, doomed attack.

Grimaldus remained with the Steel Legion troops on the northern wall, his knights spread out among the Guard's ranks, the Adeptus Astartes' own squad unity suspended. Occasionally, greenskins would manage to reach the battlements rather than being slaughtered as they climbed. In those rare moments, Templar chainblades would shear through stinking alien flesh, before Guard-issue lasrifles would finish the job with precision beams of laser light.

At some point during the endless firing downward, Major Oros had voxed Grimaldus in bemusement.

'They're just lining up to die,' he'd laughed.

'These are the most foolish, and the least in control of themselves. They hunger to fight, no matter the odds or the war being waged. Look out onto the plains, major. Witness the gathering of our real enemies.'

'Understood, Reclusiarch.'

Grimaldus heard the Legion officers shouting to their men then, ordering another change of rank. The soldiers at the battlements fell back to reload, to clean their weapons and cool down overheating power-packs. The next line advanced to take their comrades' vacated positions, stepping up to the ramparts and immediately opening fire on the climbing orks.

The smell of the siege was drifting into the city now. Mountains of alien

dead lay at the foot of the walls, their bodies ruptured and their tainted fluids leaking into the ashy soil. While the Templars and the Legionnaires were spared the worst of the stench by their helms and rebreathers, within the city itself, the civilians and militia forces were getting their first, foul taste of war against the ork-breed xenos. It was an unpleasant revelation.

Night was threatening to fall before the aliens finally fled.

Whether the mountain of their own dead had turned their fury to futility, or whether some cognition finally dawned over them all that the true battles were yet to come, the green tide retreated en masse. Horns sounded across the wasteland, hundreds of them, signalling a retreat that otherwise lacked even a hint of cohesion. Las-bolts flashed down from the walls as the Legion kept up a savage rate of fire, punishing the orks for their cowardice now just as they had punished them for their eager madness before. Hundreds more of the xenos collapsed to the ground, slain by the day's last, bitterest volley.

Soon, even the stragglers were out of range, limping their way behind the horde back to their landing sites.

Ork ships covered the wasteland now from horizon to horizon. The largest ships, almost as tall as hive spires themselves, were opening to release colossal, stomping scrap-Titans. Like hunched, fat-bellied aliens in shape, the junk-giants crashed across the plains, their pounding tread raising dust clouds in their wake.

These were the weapons that would bring the wall down. These were the foes that Invigilata had to destroy.

'That,' Artarion nodded at the sight as the knights remained on the wall, 'is a bleak picture.'

'The real battle begins tomorrow,' Cador grunted. 'At least we will not be bored.'

'I believe they will wait.' It was Grimaldus who spoke, his voice less bitter now the war cries and speeches were over. 'They will wait until they have overwhelming force with which to crush us, and they will strike like a hammer.'

The Chaplain paused, leaning on the battlements and staring at the army as sunset claimed the surrounded city.

'I requested we withdraw all Guard forces from the wasteland installations across all of southern Armageddon Secundus. The colonel agreed in

principle.’

Bastilan joined the Reclusiarch at the wall. The sergeant disengaged his helm’s seals and stood barefaced, ignoring the cool wind that prickled at his unshaven scalp.

‘What’s worth guarding out there?’

The Reclusiarch smiled, his expression hidden.

‘The days and days of briefings were a necessary evil to answer questions like that. Munitions,’ Grimaldus said. ‘A great deal of munitions, to be used when the hive cities fall and need to be reclaimed. But that is not all. The Desert Vultures spoke of a curious legend. Something buried beneath the sands. A weapon.’

‘We are involving ourselves in this world’s mythology now?’

‘Do not dismiss this. I heard something today that gave me hope.’ He took a breath, narrowing his eyes as he watched the sea of enemy banners. ‘And I have an idea. Where is Forgemaster Jurisian?’

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CHAPTER VII

ANCIENT SECRETS

Cyria Tyro leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes to rid her vision of the numbers she'd been staring at.

Casualties from the first day's engagement were light, and damage to the wall was minimal. Flamer teams had been lowered to drag the alien dead away from the city walls and burn them in massive pyres. It was a volunteer-only duty, and one that came with an element of risk – if the orks decided to attack in the night, there was no guarantee the hundreds of pyre-lighters outside could be brought back in time.

The funeral fires burned now, an hour before dawn, and though there were far too many bodies to complete the duty in a single night, the mounds of xenos dead were at least reduced.

For now, she sighed.

The ammunition expended on the first day alone had been… Well, she'd seen the numbers and could scarcely believe her eyes. The city was a fortress and its weapon reserves had seemed inexhaustible, but on a day of relatively sporadic fighting with only three regiments engaged, the logistical nightmare soon to be facing them was all too apparent. Their ammunition stocks would last months, but supplying it to regiments - scattered throughout the city, ensuring they were aware of boltholes, weapons caches and…

I'm tired, she thought with a dry smile. She'd not even fought today.

Tyro signed a few data-slates with her thumbprint, authorising the transferral of reports to Lord General Kurov and Commissar Yarrick, far off in distant hives, already engaged in their own sieges.

The door’s proximity chime pulsed once.

‘Enter,’ she called out.

Major Ryken walked in. His greatcoat was unbuttoned, his rebreather mask was hanging from its cord around his neck, and his black hair was scruffy from the rain.

‘It’s hurling it down out there,’ he grumbled. He’d come all the way from the east wall. ‘You wouldn’t believe what the orbital disturbance has done to the atmosphere. What did you want that couldn’t be done over the vox?’

‘I couldn’t reach Colonel Sarren.’

‘He’d not slept in over sixty hours. I think Falkov threatened to shoot him unless he got some rest.’ Ryken narrowed his eyes. ‘There are other colonels. Dozens of them.’

‘True, but none of those are the city commander’s executive officer.’

The major scratched the back of his neck. His skin was cold, itching and grimy with the faintly acidic rainwater.

‘Miss Tyro,’ he began.

‘Actually, given my rank as adjutant quintus to the planetary leader, I’ll settle for “ma’am” or “advisor”. Not “Miss Tyro”. This is not a society function, and if it were, I would not be spending it talking to a drowned rat like you, major.’

Ryken grinned. Tyro didn’t.

‘Very well, *ma’am*, how may this lowly rodent be of service? I have a storm to get back out into before dawn.’

She looked around her own cramped but warm office in the central command tower, hiding her guilty flush by faking a cough.

‘We received these from Acheron Hive an hour ago.’ She gestured at several printed sheets of paper featuring topographic images. Ryken picked them up from her messy desk, flipping through them.

‘These are orbital picts,’ he said.

‘I know what they are.’

‘I thought the enemy fleet had destroyed all our satellites.’

‘They have. These were among the last images our orbital defence array was able to send. Acheron received them, and sent them on to the other cities.’

Ryken turned one of the images to face her. ‘This one has a caffeine stain on it. Did Acheron send that?’

Tyro scowled at him. ‘Grow up, major.’

He spent a few more moments regarding the printed picts. ‘What am I looking for here?’

‘These are picts of the Dead Lands to the south. *Far* to the south, across the ocean.’

‘I paid attention in basic geography, thank you, ma’am.’ Ryken went through the picts a second time, lingering over the images of massive ork planetfall discolouring the landscape. ‘This makes no sense,’ he said at last.

‘I know.’

‘There’s nothing in the Dead Lands. Not a thing.’

‘I know, major.’

‘So do we have any idea why they landed a force there that looks large enough to take a city?’

‘Tacticians suggest the enemy is establishing a spaceport there. Or a colony.’

Ryken snorted, letting the picts drop back onto her desk.

‘The tacticians are drunk,’ he said. ‘Every man, woman and child knows why the xenos come here: to fight. To fight until either they’re all dead, or we are. They don’t raise the greatest armada in history just to pitch tents at the south pole and raise ugly alien babies.’

‘The fact remains,’ Tyro gestured to the prints, ‘that the enemy is there. Their distance across the ocean puts them out of reach for air strikes. No flyers would reach us without needing to refuel several times. They could just as easily set up airstrips in the wastelands much nearer the hive cities. In fact, we can already see they’re doing just that.’

‘What about the oil platforms?’ he asked.

‘The platforms?’ she shook her head, not sure where he was leading with this.

‘You’re kidding me,’ Ryken said. ‘The Valdez oil platforms. Didn’t you study Helsreach before you were posted here? Where do you think half of the hive cities in Armageddon Secundus get their fuel from? They take it in here from the offshore platforms and cook it into promethium for the rest of the continent.’

Tyro already knew this. She let him have his moment of feigned indignity.

‘I paid attention,’ she smiled, ‘in basic economics. The platforms are protected from these southernmost raiders by the same virtue we are. It’s

just too far to strike at them.’

‘Then with all due respect, ma’am, why did you pull me off the wall? I have duties to perform.’

And here it was. She had to deal with this matter delicately.

‘I… would appreciate your assistance. First, I must disseminate this information among the other officers.’

‘You don’t need my help for that. You need access to a vox-caster, and you’re sitting in a building full of them. Why should they care, anyway? What does a potential colony of the enemy on the polar cap have to do with the defence of the hive?’

‘High Command has informed me that the matter is to be considered Helsreach’s problem. We are – relatively speaking – the closest city.’

Ryken laughed. ‘Would they like us to invade? I’ll get the men ready and tell them to wrap up warm and lay siege to the south pole. I hope the orks outside the city respect the fact we’ll be absent for the rest of the siege. They look like sporting gentlemen. I’m sure they’ll wait for us to return to the hive before attacking again.’

‘*Major.*’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘High Command has informed me to spread the information and let all officers be aware of the concern. That is all. No invasions. And it is not what I require your aid with.’

‘Then what is it?’

‘Grimaldus,’ she said.

‘Is that a fact? Problems with the Emperor’s finest?’

‘This is a serious matter.’ Tyro frowned.

‘Fair enough. But talk from the Vultures said that he was finally getting involved. They apparently got one hell of a speech.’

‘He performed his duties on the wall with great skill and devotion.’ She still wasn’t smiling. ‘That is not the problem at hand.’

Ryken let his raised eyebrow do the talking.

Tyro sighed. ‘The problem is one of contact and mediation. He refuses to talk to me.’ She paused, as if considering something for the first time. ‘Perhaps because I’m female.’

‘You’re serious,’ Ryken said. ‘You truly believe that.’

‘Well… He has bonded with the male officers, hasn’t he?’

Ryken thought that was debatable. He'd heard that the only commander in the city Grimaldus had treated with anything more than disdainful impatience was the ancient woman that led the Legio Invigilata. And even that was just rumour.

'It's not because you're female,' the major said. 'It's because you're useless.'

The pause lasted several seconds, during which Cyria Tyro's face hardened with each passing moment.

'Excuse me?' she asked.

'Useless to them, shall we say. It's simple. You're the liaison between a High Command that is too busy to care what happens here, too distant to make much difference even if it did care, and off-world forces that have no need or interest in playing nice with the grunts of the Guard. Does the Crone of Invigilata need to pass orders through you? Does Grimaldus? No. Neither group cares.'

'The chain of command…' she started, but trailed off.

'The chain of command is a system both the Legio and the Templars are outside. And above, if they choose to be.'

'I feel useless,' she finally said. 'And not just to them.'

He could see how much that admission cost her. He could also see that she didn't seem such a haughty bitch when her defences were down. Just as Ryken drew breath to speak, and tell her a more polite version of his current thoughts, her desk vox-speaker buzzed.

'Adjutant Quintus Cyria Tyro?' asked a deep, resonant male voice.

'Yes. Who is this?'

'Reclusiarch Grimaldus of the Black Templars. I must speak with you.'

The Crone of Invigilata floated in her fluid-filled coffin, appearing to listen to the muffled sounds outside.

In truth, she was paying little attention. The muted sounds of speech and movement belonged to a world of physicality that she barely remembered. Linked with *Stormherald,* the god-machine's ever-present rumbling anger infected her like a chemical injected into her mind. Even in moments of peace, it was difficult to focus on anything but wrath.

To share a mind with *Stormherald* was to dwell within a maze of memories that were not her own. *Stormherald* had looked upon countless

battlefields for hundreds of years before Princeps Zarha was even born. She had only to shut down the imagefinders that now served as her eyes, and as the hazy image of her milky surroundings faded to nothing, she could remember deserts she had never seen, wars she had never fought, glories she had never won.

Stormherald's voice in her mind was an unrelenting murmur, a hum of quiet tension, like a low-burning fire. It challenged her, with wordless growls, to taste of the victories it had tasted for so long – to swim beneath the surface memories and surrender to them. Its spirit was a proud and indefatigable machine-soul, and it hungered not only for the fiery maelstrom of war, but also the cold exultation of triumph. It felt the banners of past wars that hung from its metal skin, and it knew fierce, unbreakable pride.

'My princeps,' came a muffled voice.

Zarha activated her photoreceptors. Borrowed memories faded and vision returned. Strange, how the former were so much clearer than the latter, these days.

Hello, Valian.

'Hello, Valian.'

'My princeps, the adepts of the soul are reporting discontent within *Stormherald*'s heart. We are getting anomalous readings of ill-temper from the reactor core.'

We are angry, moderati. We yearn to bring the thunder down upon our foes.

'We are angry, moderati. We yearn to bring the thunder down upon our foes.'

'That is understandable, my princeps. You are… operating at peak capacity? You are sanguine?'

Are you querying if I am at risk of being consumed by Stormherald's heart?

'Are you querying if I am at risk of be*kkrrssshhhhh* heart?'

'Maintenance adept,' Valian Carsomir called to a robed tech-priest. 'Attend to the princeps's vocaliser unit.' He turned back to his commander. 'I trust you, my princeps. Forgive me for troubling you.'

There is nothing to forgive, Valian.

'There is noth*kkkrrrrrsssssssssh*.'

That would become annoying after a while, she thought, but did not pulse the sentiment to her vocaliser. *Your concern touches me, Valian.*

‘Your concern touches me, Valian.’

But I am well.

‘B*krsh* I am well.’

The tech-adept stood by the side of Zarha’s amniotic tank. Mechanical arms slid from his robe and began to do their work.

Moderati Primus Valian Carsomir hesitated, before making the sign of the cog and returning to his station.

We will see battle soon, Valian. Grimaldus has promised it to us.

‘We will see battle soon, Valian. Grimaldus has promised it to us.’

Valian didn’t reply at first. If the enemy was going to amass its numbers first, shelling the foe from the safety of the city walls was hardly seeing battle, in his eyes.

‘We are all ready, my princeps.’

Tomaz couldn’t sleep.

He sat up in bed, swallowing another stinging mouthful of amasec, the cheap, thin stuff that Heddon brewed in one of the back warehouses down at the docks. The stuff tasted more than a little of engine oil. It wouldn’t have surprised Tomaz to learn that was one of the ingredients.

He swallowed another burning gulp that itched its way down his throat. There was, he realised, a more than good chance he was going to throw this stuff back up soon. It had a habit of not sitting too well on an empty stomach once it went down, but he didn’t think he could manage another dry meal of preserved rations. Tomaz glanced at several packets of unopened, densely packed grain tablets on the table.

Maybe later.

He’d not been anywhere near the north and eastern walls. At the south docks, there was little difference between today and any other day. The grinding joints of his crane drowned out any of the distant sounds of the war, and he’d spent his twelve-hour shift unloading tankers and organising distribution from the warehouses in his district – just as he spent every shift.

The backlog of docked tankers, and those awaiting docking clearance, was beyond a joke. Half of Tomaz’s crew was gone, conscripted into the militia reserves and sent across the city to play at being Guardsmen, kilometres

away from where they were really needed. He was the elected representative of the Dockers' Union, and he knew every other foreman was suffering the same lack of manpower. It made a difficult job completely laughable, except none of them were smiling.

There had been talk of limiting the flow of crude coming in from the Valdez platforms once the orbital defences fell, under fears the orks would bombard the shipping lanes.

Necessity outweighed the risk of tanker crews dying, of course. Helsreach needed fuel. The flow continued. Even with the city sealed, the docks remained open.

And they were somehow busier than before, despite the fact there was only half the manpower on the crews. Teams of Steel Legionnaires and menial servitors manned the many anti-air turrets along the dockside and the warehouse rooftops. Hundreds upon hundreds of warehouses were now used to house tanks, converted into maintenance terminals and garages for war machine repair. Convoys of Leman Russ battle tanks shuddered through the docks, strangling thoroughfares with their slow processions.

Half-crewed and slowed by constant interference, the Helsreach docks were almost at a standstill.

And still the tankers arrived.

Tomaz checked his wrist chronometer. Just over two hours until dawn.

He resigned himself to not getting any sleep before his shift began, and took another drink from the bottle of disgusting amasec.

Heddon really should be shot for brewing this rat piss.

She stood in the storm, her Steel Legion greatcoat heavy around her shoulders.

The lashing rainfall did little to clean the streets. The reek of sulphur rose from the wet buildings around her as the acidic rain mixed with the pollution coating the stonework and rockcrete across the city.

Not a good time to forget your rebreather, Cyria…

Major Ryken escorted her along the north wall. In the dim distance to the east, the sun was already bringing dawn's first glimmer to the sky. Cyria didn't want to look over the wall's edge, but couldn't help herself. The dim illumination revealed the enemy's army, a tide of darkness that reached from horizon to horizon.

‘Throne of the God-Emperor,’ she whispered.

‘It could be worse,’ Ryken said, guiding her onwards after she’d frozen at the sight.

‘There must be millions of them out there.’

‘Without a doubt.’

‘Hundreds of tribes… You can make out their banners…’

‘I try not to. Eyes ahead, ma’am.’

Cyria turned with reluctance. Ahead of her, fifty metres down the wall, a group of giant black statues stood in the rainfall, the deluge making the edges of their armour shine.

One of the giants moved, his boots thudding on the wall as he walked towards her. The harsh wind whipped the soaked scrolls tied to his armour, and drenched his tabard with its black cross upon the chest.

His face was a grinning silver skull, the eyes staring a soulless red, right through her.

‘Cyria Tyro,’ he said in a deep, vox-crackling voice, ‘greetings.’ The Adeptus Astartes made the sign of the aquila, his dark gauntlets banging against his chestplate as they formed the symbol. ‘And Major Ryken of the 101st. Welcome to the north wall.’

Ryken returned the salute. ‘I heard you gave the Vultures a speech earlier, Reclusiarch,’ he said.

‘They are fine warriors, all,’ Grimaldus said. ‘They needed none of my words, but it was a pleasure to share them, nevertheless.’

Ryken was caught momentarily off-guard. He’d not expected an answer, let alone this unnerving humility. Before he could reply, Cyria spoke up. She looked up at Grimaldus, shielding her eyes from the downpour. The hum of his armour made her gums itch. The sound seemed to be louder than before, as if reacting to the bad weather.

‘How may I be of service, Reclusiarch?’

‘That is the wrong question,’ the knight said, his vox-voice a low growl. The rain scythed onto his armour, hissing as it hit the dark ceramite. ‘The question is one you must answer, not one you must ask.’

‘As you wish,’ she said. His formality was making her uncomfortable. In fact, everything about him was making her uncomfortable.

‘We have defensive positions in the wastelands, manned by the Steel Legion. Platoons of the Desert Vultures, among other regiments, have dug

in to hold these against the enemy. Small towns, coastal depots, weapons caches, fuel dumps, listening stations.'

Tyro nodded. Most of these outposts, and their relative strategic value, had been covered in the command meetings.

'Yes,' she said, for want of anything else to say.

'Yes,' he repeated her reply, sounding amused. 'I was informed today exactly what is stored in the underground hangar of the D-16 West outpost, ninety-eight kilometres to the north-west of the city. None of our briefings mentioned it was a sealed Mechanicus facility.'

Tyro and Ryken exchanged a glance. The major shrugged a shoulder. Although most of his face was masked by his rebreather, his eyes showed he had no idea what the Chaplain was inferring. Cyria's glance fell back to the towering knight's crimson gaze.

'I've seen little data on D-16 West's storage consignments, Reclusiarch. All I know is that a deactivated relic from the era of the First War is stored in the sub-level compound. No Guard personnel are permitted access to the innards of the facility. It is considered sovereign Mechanicus territory.'

'I learned the same today. That does not intrigue you?' the Adeptus Astartes asked.

It was a fair question. In truth, no, it didn't interest her at all. The First War had been won almost six hundred years ago, and the planet's face was one of different cities and different armies now.

'Whether I find it fascinating or not is hardly of consequence,' she said. 'Whatever is stored there is impounded under orders of the Adeptus Mechanicus – I suspect for a damn good reason – and is a secret even from Planetary High Command. Even our Guard force there is a token battle group. They are not expected to survive the first month.'

'Do you know your history, Adjutant Tyro?' Grimaldus's voice was calm, low and composed. 'Before we made planetfall here, a great deal was committed to our memories. All lore is useful in the right hands. All information can be a weapon against the enemy.'

'I have studied several of the decisive battles of the First War,' she said. All Steel Legion officers had.

'Then you will know what Mechanicus weapon was designed and first deployed here.'

'Throne,' Ryken whispered. 'Holy Throne of Terra.'

‘I… don’t think you can be right…’ Tyro told the Adeptus Astartes.

‘Perhaps not,’ Grimaldus conceded, ‘but I intend to learn the truth for myself. One of our gunships will carry a small group to D-16 West in one hour.’

‘But it’s sealed!’

‘It will not be sealed for long.’

‘It’s Mechanicus territory!’

‘I do not care. If I am right in my suspicions, there is a weapon there. I want that weapon, Cyria Tyro. And I will have it.’

She pulled her greatcoat tighter around her body as the storm intensified.

‘If it were something that would help with the war,’ she said, ‘the Mechanicus would have deployed it by now.’

‘I do not believe that, and I am surprised that you do. The Mechanicus has committed a great deal in the defence of Armageddon. That does not mean they have the same stake in the war that we do. I have battled alongside the Cult of Mars many times. They breathe secrecy instead of air.’

‘You can’t leave the city before dawn. The enemy–’

‘The enemy will not break the city walls in the first day. And Bayard, Emperor’s Champion of the Helsreach Crusade, will command the Templars in my absence.’

‘I can’t allow you to do this. It will enrage the Mechanicus.’

‘I am not asking for your permission, adjutant.’ Grimaldus paused, and she swore she could hear a smile in his next words. ‘I am asking if you wish to come with us.’

‘I… I…’

‘You informed me upon my arrival that you were here to facilitate interaction between the off-world forces and those of Armageddon.’

‘I know, but–’

‘Mark my words, Cyria Tyro. If the Mechanicus has reasons for not deploying that weapon, they may not be reasons that other Imperial commanders will find acceptable. I do not care about those reasons. I care about winning this war.’

‘I’ll accompany you,’ she almost choked on the words. Throne, what was she doing…

‘I thought you would,’ said Grimaldus. ‘The sun is rising. Come, to the Thunderhawk. My brothers already wait.’

The gunship shuddered as its boosters lifted it from the landing platform.

The pilot, an Initiate knight with few honour markings on his armour, guided the ship skyward.

‘Try not to get us shot down,’ Artarion said to him, standing behind the pilot’s throne in the cockpit. They were set to fly above the clouds anyway, and take a course over the ocean and the coast before veering inland once they were clear of the besieging army and its fighter support.

‘Brother,’ the Initiate said, watching the city falling below as he applied vertical thrust, ‘does anyone ever laugh at your jokes?’

‘Humans sometimes do.’

The pilot didn’t reply to that. Artarion’s answer said it all. The gunship gave a kick as its velocity boosters fired, and through the cockpit window, the toxic cloud cover began to slide past.

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CHAPTER VIII

OBERON

Domoska muttered the Litany of Focus as she looked through the sight of her lasrifle. She blinked behind her sunglare goggles, then raised them to look through the gunsight again without the tinted lenses darkening her vision.

‘Uh, Andrej?’ she called over her shoulder.

The two soldiers were at their modest camp on the perimeter of D-16’s boundaries. Sat on the desert sands, cleaning their rifles, the fact they were away from the main base also set them apart from the other forty-eight Steel Legionnaires assigned to this pointless, suicidal duty.

Andrej didn’t look up from his lap, where he was wiping laspistol power cell packs with an oily rag.

‘What is it now, eh? I’m busy, okay?’

‘Is that a gunship?’

‘What are you talking about, eh?’ Andrej was from Armageddon Prime, on the far side of the world. His accent always made Domoska grin. Almost everything he said sounded like a question.

‘That,’ she pointed into the sky, close to the horizon. Nothing was visible to the naked eye, and Andrej groped on the coat laid out on the ground, reaching for his detached gunsight.

‘Listen, okay, I am trying to respect the spirit of my weapon, yes? What is this you want? I see no gunship.’ He stared through his sight, squinting.

‘A few degrees above the horizon.’

‘Oh, hey, yes that is a gunship, okay? You must report it at once.’

‘This is Domoska, at Boundary Three. Contact, contact, contact. Imperial

gunship inbound.’

‘That is the Black Templars, yes? They are from Helsreach. I know this. I listen to my briefings. I do not sleep, like you.’

‘Be quiet,’ she murmured, waiting for confirmation over the vox.

‘I will be the one with so many medals, I think. You have nothing, eh?’

‘Be quiet!’

‘Acknowledged,’ the reply finally came. Andrej took that as his cue to speak again.

‘I hope they are saying we may return to the city, okay? That would be good news. High walls! Titans! We might even survive this war, eh?’

Neither of them had ever seen a Thunderhawk gunship before. As it came in on howling thrusters, slowing down and hovering over the almost abandoned facility of empty warehouses and storage bunkers, Domoska had a sinking sensation in her stomach.

‘This can’t be good.’ She bit her lower lip.

‘I do not agree, you know? This is Adeptus Astartes business. It will be good. Good for us, bad for the enemy.’

She just looked at him.

‘What? It will be good. You will see, eh? I am always right.’

Storm trooper Captain Insa Rashevska glanced at the soldiers on either side of her as the gunship’s front ramp lowered on hissing hydraulics.

One thought had been rattling around her mind in the five minutes since Domoska had voxed in the sighting, and that was a very simple, clear: *Why in the hells are the Adeptus Astartes here?*

She was about to get her answer.

‘Should we… salute?’ one of her men asked from his position at Rashevska’s side. ‘Is that what you’re supposed to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘Just stand at attention.’

The gang ramp clanged as boots descended. A human – from the Legion, no less – and two Templars.

Both Adeptus Astartes wore the black of their Chapter. One was draped in a tabard showing personal heraldry, and his helm showed an ornate death mask as the faceplate. The other wore much bulkier armour, with additional layers of ablative plating, and the war-plate whirred and clanked as its false-muscles moved.

‘Captain,’ the Legion officer said. ‘I’m Adjutant Quintus Tyro, seconded to Hive Helsreach from the Lord General’s command staff. With me are Reclusiarch Grimaldus and Master of the Forge Jurisian, of the Black Templars Chapter.’

Rashevska made the sign of the aquila, trying not to show her unease in the presence of the towering warriors. Four machine-arms, their servo-joints grinding, unlocked from Jurisian’s thrumming back-mounted power pack. Their metal claws clicked open and snapped closed while the arms themselves extended as if stretching.

‘Greetings,’ Jurisian rumbled.

‘Captain,’ Grimaldus said.

‘We have come to enter the installation,’ Cyria Tyro smiled.

Rashevska said nothing for almost ten seconds. When she did speak, it was with a stunned and disbelieving laugh.

‘Forgive me, is this a joke?’

‘Far from it,’ Grimaldus said, striding past her.

On the surface, D-16 West wasn’t a particularly grand site. Rising from the wasteland’s sandy soil were a cluster of buildings, all of which were solidly built and armoured – almost bunker-like in their squat construction. All were empty, save for those now occupied by the small Steel Legion force stationed here. In those buildings, bedrolls and equipment were arranged in an order that spoke of discipline. Two expansive landing platforms, easily big enough for the bulky Mechanicus cruisers that could even carry Titans, were half buried in sand, as the desert slowly reclaimed the facility.

The only architecture of significant interest was a roadway over a hundred metres in width that led into the ground beneath the surface complex. Whatever colossal doors had once opened into the underground complex were long buried beneath the wasteland’s shifting tides. It would only be a handful of decades before the last evidence of the roadway itself was covered over.

One of the bunker buildings contained nothing but a series of elevators. The bulkhead doors to each lift were sealed, and the machinery lining the walls and connected to the shafts was all powered down. Keypads with runic buttons of various colours were installed on the wall next to each closed door.

‘There is no power here,’ the Reclusiarch said as he looked around. ‘They

left this place entirely devoid of energy?' That would make reactivation – if this installation was even ever meant to be reactivated – an incredibly difficult operation.

Jurisian walked around the interior of the bunker, his thudding tread making the floor tremble.

'No,' he said, his vox-voice a slow, considering drawl. 'There is power. The installation sleeps, but does not lie dead. It is locked in hibernation. Power still beats through its veins. The resonance is low, the pulse is slow. I hear it, nevertheless.'

Grimaldus stroked his fingertips along the closest keypad, staring at the unknown sigils that marked each button. The language of the runes was not High Gothic.

'Can you open these doors?' he asked. 'Can you get us down into the complex?'

Jurisian's four machine-arms extended again, their claws articulating. Two of the servo-arms came over the Techmarine's shoulders. The other two remained closely aligned with his true arms. The Master of the Forge approached one of the other elevator bulkheads, already reaching for his enhanced auspex scanner mag-locked to his belt. The arms reaching over his shoulders took Jurisian's bolter and blade, gripping them in claw clamps and leaving the knight's hands free.

'Jurisian? Can you do this?'

'It will necessitate a great deal of rerouting power from auxiliary sources, and those will be difficult to reach from a remote connection point here. A parasitic feed is required from–'

'Jurisian. Answer the question.'

'Forgive me, Reclusiarch. Yes. I will need one hour.'

Grimaldus waited, statue-still, watching Jurisian work. Cyria quickly grew bored, and wandered through the complex, speaking with the storm troopers on duty. Two were returning from their shift at a boundary post, and the adjutant waved them over as she stood in the avian shadow cast by the gunship.

'Ma'am,' the female trooper saluted. 'Welcome to D-16 West.'

'Now we have Helsreach brass coming to visit, okay?' said the other. He made the sign of the aquila a moment later. 'I told you it would be good.'

Cyria returned their salutes, not even a little off-guard at their

nonchalance. Storm troopers were the best of the best, and their distance from regular troops often bred a little… uniqueness… into their attitudes.

‘I’m Adjutant Quintus Tyro.’

‘We know. We were told this on the vox. Digging for secrets in the sand, yes? That is not going to make the Mechanicus smile, I think.’

Whether the Mechanicus would be pleased or not evidently didn’t matter to this man. He was smiling, either way.

‘A big risk,’ he added, nodding sagely as if this were some hidden truth he had worked out alone. ‘It may bring much trouble, eh?’ He still seemed entertained by the concept.

‘With respect,’ the female trooper – her stormcoat badge read DOMOSKA in flat black letters – said, looking uncomfortable, ‘Will this not anger the Legio Invigilata?’

Tyro stroked a stray lock of her dark hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. She repeated exactly what Grimaldus had said to her when she’d asked the same question during the Thunderhawk flight here.

‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘but it’s not like they can leave the city in protest, is it?’

The doors opened.

The motion was smooth, but the noise of resistant machine-innards was immense: a squealing, unlubricated whine that split the air. Inside the elevator, the spacious car had enough room for twenty humans. Its walls were a matt, gunmetal grey.

Jurisian stepped back from the control console.

‘It was necessary to power down all other ascent/descent systems. This one shaft will function. The others are now soulless.’

Grimaldus nodded. ‘Will we be able to return to the surface once we go down?’

‘There is a thirty-three point eight per cent chance, given current system destabilisation, that a return ascent will require additional maintenance and reconfiguring. There is a further twenty-nine per cent chance that no reconfiguring will restore function without access to the primary installation power network.’

‘The word you’re looking for, brother,’ Grimaldus stepped towards the open doors, ‘is “maybe”.’

They wandered down there for hours.

The underground complex was a silent – and initially lightless – series of labyrinthine corridors and deserted chambers. Jurisian brought the installation's overhead lighting back online after several minutes at a wall console.

Cyria clicked her torch off. Grimaldus cancelled his helm's vision intensifier settings. With flickering reluctance, dull yellow lighting illuminated their surroundings.

'I have resuscitated the spirits of the illuminatory array,' Jurisian said. 'They are weak from slumber, but should hold.'

The bland greyness all around them soon grew uninspiring as they ventured deeper into the complex. Around corners, through silent chambers with inactive engines, motionless machinery and generators of unknowable purpose.

Jurisian would occasionally pause and examine some of the Mechanicus's abandoned technology.

'This is a magnetic field stabiliser housing,' he said at one point, walking around what looked to Cyria like an oversized tank engine as big as a Chimera.

'What does it do?' she made the mistake of asking.

'It houses the stabilisers for a magnetic field generator.'

Her fear of the Adeptus Astartes had dimmed some way by this point. She fought the urge to sigh, but failed.

'Do you mean,' Jurisian enquired, 'what application does this have in Imperial technology?'

'That's close to what I meant, yes. What is its purpose?'

'Magnetic fields of significant size and intensity are difficult to create and a struggle to maintain. Many of these units would be required to work in synchronicity, stabilising a powerful field of magnetic force. Such standard constructs as this housing are used in anti-gravitational technology, much of which is kept sealed by Mechanicus secrecy. More commonly, the Imperial Navy would use these units in the construction and maintenance of starship-sized magnetic accelerator rings. Plasma weapon technology, on a grand scale.'

'No,' Cyria shook her head. 'It can't be.'

'We shall see,' Jurisian rumbled. 'This is only the installation's first level.

From the angle of the buried roadway, I would conjecture that the complex proceeds beneath the earth for at least a kilometre. From my knowledge of template patterns used in Mechanicus facility construction, it is more likely to be two or three kilometres deep.'

Nine hours after Grimaldus, Jurisian and Cyria had entered the installation, they reached the fourth sublevel. The third level had taken almost six hours to traverse, with sealed doors requiring more and more intensive manipulation to coax open. At one point, Grimaldus had been certain they were thwarted. He hefted his crozius in both hands, triggering it live, ready to vent his anger on the unopening door.

'Don't,' Jurisian said, without looking up from the controls.

'Why not? You said this might be impossible, and time is not our ally down here.'

'Do not apply force to the doors. These are, as you have seen, each no less than four metres thick. While you will eventually hammer through to the other side, it will not be a rapid endeavour, and such violence is likely to activate the installation's significant defences.'

Grimaldus lowered his mace. 'I see no defences.'

'No. That is their strength, and the primary reason no living and augmetic guards are required.'

He still did not look away from his work as he spoke. Four of Jurisian's six arms all worked at the console: hitting buttons, pulling clusters of wires and cables, tying them, fusing them together, replacing them, tuning dead screens. His lower servo-arms were now coiled close to his back-mounted power pack, carrying his bolter and power sword.

'There are,' Jurisian continued, 'twelve hundred needle-thin holes in the walls, spaced ten centimetres apart, in this corridor alone.'

Grimaldus examined the walls. His visor locked on to one immediately, now he knew they were there.

'And these are…?'

'A defence. Part of one. The application of force, no matter how righteous, brother, will trigger the machinery behind these holes – and the same holes in many other corridors and chambers throughout the complex – to release a toxic gas. It is my estimation that the gas would attack the nervous system and respiration above all, making it especially lethal to fully biological

intruders.’

The Master of the Forge nodded pointedly to Cyria.

Grimaldus’s crozius went dead as he released the trigger. ‘Have there been other defences that escaped our attention?’

‘Yes,’ Jurisian said. ‘Many. From automated las-turrets to voidshield screens. Forgive me, Reclusiarch, this code manipulation requires my full attention.’

That had been three hours ago.

Finally, the doors opened to the fourth sublevel. To Cyria, the air was painfully cold, and she pulled her stormcoat tightly closed.

Grimaldus failed to notice her discomfort. Jurisian merely commented, ‘The temperature is at a survivable level. You will not suffer lasting harm. This is common in Mechanicus facilities that are left on minimal power.’

She nodded, her teeth chattering.

Ahead of them, the corridor widened to end in a huge double doorway, sealed as every other door had been so far. On this one, etched into the dull, grey metal, was a single word in bold Gothic.

- OBERON -

This was why Grimaldus hadn’t noticed Cyria’s shivering. He could not take his eyes off the inscription, with each letter standing as tall as a Templar.

‘I was right,’ he breathed. ‘This is it.’

Jurisian was already at the door. One of his human hands stroked the surface of the sealed portal, while the others accessed the wall terminal nearby. Its complexity was horrific compared to those stationed at the previous doors.

‘It is so beautiful…’ Jurisian sounded both hesitant and awed. ‘It is magnificent. This would survive orbital bombardment. Even the use of cyclonic torpedoes against nearby hives would barely harm the protection around this chamber. It is void-shielded, armoured like no bunker I have ever seen… and sealed with… with a billion or more individual codes.’

‘Can you do it?’ Grimaldus asked, his gauntleted fingertips brushing the ‘O’ in the inscribed name.

‘I have never witnessed anything so complex and incredible. It would be

like mapping every particle within a star.’

Grimaldus withdrew his hand. He seemed not to have heard.

‘Can you do it?’

‘Yes, Reclusiarch. But it will take between nine and eleven days. And I would like my servitors sent to me as soon as you return. ’

‘It will be done.’

Cyria Tyro felt tears standing in her eyes as she stared at the name. ‘I don’t believe it. It can’t be here.’

‘It is,’ Grimaldus said, taking a last look at the doors. ‘This is where the Mechanicus hid the Ordinatus Armageddon after the First War. This is the tomb of *Oberon.*’

As they returned to the surface, Cyria’s hand-vox crackled for her attention, and a signal rune pulsed on Grimaldus’s retinal display.

‘Tyro, here,’ she said into her communicator.

‘Grimaldus. Speak,’ he said within his helm.

It was the same message, delivered by two different sources. Tyro had Colonel Sarren, his voice more of an exhausted sigh than anything else. Grimaldus heard the clipped, imperious tones of Champion Bayard.

‘Reclusiarch,’ the champion said. ‘The Old Man’s predictions were correct, as you suspected. The enemy is annihilating Hades Hive from orbit. It is crudely done. Standard bombardment, with mass drivers to hurl asteroids at a defenceless city. A dark day’s work, brother. Will you return soon?’

‘We are on our way back now,’ he said, and killed the link.

Tyro lowered her communicator, her face pale.

‘Yarrick was right,’ she said. ‘Hades is burning.’

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CHAPTER IX

GAMBITS

The enemy did not come on the second day.

The defenders watched from the walls of Helsreach as the wastelands turned black with enemy vessels and clans of orks establishing their territory, making primitive camps and raising banners to the sky. More landers brought new floods of troops. Bulk cruisers disgorged fat-hulled wreck-Titans.

Upon the enemy banners, thousands of crudely painted symbols faced the city, each one depicting a bloodline, a tribe, a xenos war-clan that would soon be hurling itself into battle.

From the battlements, the Imperial soldiers marked these symbols, and responded in kind. Standards flew above the walls – one for every regiment serving inside the city. The Steel Legion banners flew in greatest number, ochre and orange and yellow and black.

After he returned from D-16 West, Grimaldus himself planted the banner of the Black Templars among those already standing on the north wall. The Desert Vultures gathered to watch the knight ram the banner pole into the rockcrete, and swear an oath that Helsreach would never fall while one defender still lived.

‘Hades may burn,’ he called to the gathered soldiers, ‘but it burns because the enemy fears us. It burns to hide the enemy’s shame, so they need never look upon the place where they lost the last war. While the walls of Helsreach stand, so stands this banner. While one defender draws breath, the city will never be lost.’

In echo of his gesture, Cyria Tyro persuaded a moderati to plant the banner

of the Legio Invigilata nearby. Lacking a banner suitable for handling by humans rather than the huge standards that were borne by the god-machines, one of the weapon-arm pennants from the Warhound Titan *Executor* was used in absentia – mounted on a pole and driven into the wall between two Steel Legion banners.

The soldiers on the wall cheered. Unused to such attention outside the cockpit of his beloved Warhound, the moderati seemed awkwardly pleased by the reaction. He made the sign of the cog to the officers present, and made the sign of the aquila a moment later, as if anxiously covering a mistake.

At night, the winds blew harder and colder. It almost cleared the air of the sulphuric stench that was forever present and, at its strongest, it dragged the standard of the 91st Steel Legion from the battlements of the west wall. Preachers attached to the regiment warned that it was an omen – that the 91st would be the first to fall if they did not stand defiant when the true storm struck.

As the sun was setting, Helsreach shook with thunder to match the maelstrom taking place on the wastelands. *Stormherald* was leading several of its metal kin to the walls, where the largest – the battle-class Titans – could fire over the battlements once the enemy came in range.

The Guard were ordered to abandon the walls for hundreds of metres around the god-machines. The sound of their weapons discharging would be deafening to anyone too close, and even being near the gigantic guns could be lethal, with the amount of energy they unleashed as they fired.

No one in Helsreach would be sleeping tonight.

He opened his eyes.

‘Brother,’ a voice called to him. ‘The Crone of Invigilata requests your presence.’

Grimaldus had returned to the city hours ago. He had been expecting this summons.

‘I am in prayer,’ he said into the vox.

‘I know, Reclusiarch.’ It was not like Artarion to be so formal.

‘Did she *request* my presence, Artarion?’

‘No, Reclusiarch. She, ah, “demanded” it.’

‘Inform Invigilata I will attend Princeps Zarha within the hour, once my

ritual observations are complete.’

‘I do not believe she is in the mood to be kept waiting, Grimaldus.’

‘Nevertheless, waiting is what she will do.’

The Chaplain closed his eyes again as he kneeled on the floor of the small, empty chamber in the command spire, and once more let his mouth form the whispered words of reverence.

I approach the amniotic tank.

My weapons are not in my hands, and this time, in the close confines of the Titan’s busy cockpit chamber, the tension from before is distilled into something altogether more fierce. The crewmen, the pilots, the tech-priests… They stare with unconcealed hostility. Several hands rest on belts close to sheathed blades or holstered firearms.

I refrain from laughing at this display, though it is no easy feat. They command the greatest war machine in the entire city, yet they concern themselves with ceremonial daggers and autopistols.

Zarha, the Crone of Invigilata, floats before me. Her lined, matronly face is twisted by emotion. Her limbs twitch in gentle spasm every few moments – feedback from the link with *Stormherald*’s soul.

‘You requested my presence?’ I say to her.

The old woman suspended in the fluid licks her metallic teeth. **‘No. I summoned you.’**

‘And that was your first mistake, princeps,’ I tell her. ‘You are granted permission to make only two more before this conversation is over.’

She snarls, her face hideous in the milky fluids. **‘Enough of your posturing, Adeptus Astartes. You should be slain where you stand.’**

I look around the cockpit, at the nine souls in here with me. My targeting reticule locks on to all visible weapons, before returning to focus on the Crone’s withered features.

‘That would be an unwise solution,’ I tell her. ‘No one in this room is capable of wounding me. Should you call the eight skitarii waiting outside the doors, I would still leave this chamber a charnel house. And you, princeps, would be the last to die. Could you run from me? I think not. I would tear you from your artificial womb, and as you choked in the air, I would hurl you from the eye-windows of your precious Titan, to die naked and alone on the cold ground of the city you were too proud to defend.

Now, if you are quite finished with the exchange of threats, I would ask you to move on to more important matters.'

She smiles, but the hatred curling her lips is all I see. It is, in its own way, beautiful. Nothing is purer than hatred. With hatred, humanity was forged. Through hatred, we have brought the galaxy to its knees.

'I see you do not show your face this time, knight. You see me revealed, yet you hide behind the death mask of your Emperor.'

'*Our* Emperor,' I remind her. 'You have just made your second mistake, Zarha.'

I disengage my helm's collar seals and lift the mask clear. The air smells of sweat, oil, fear and chemical-rich fluids. I ignore the others, ignore all but her. Despite the bitterness around me that deepens with each moment, it is comfortable to stand without my senses enclosed by my helm. Since planetfall, the only time I have removed my helm in the company of others has been on the two occasions I have spoken with the Crone.

'I said when last we met,' she watches me carefully, **'that you had kind eyes.'**

'I remember.'

'It is true. But I regret it. I regret ever speaking a fair word to you, blasphemer.'

For a moment, I am not sure how to respond to that.

'You stand on difficult ground, Zarha. I am a Chaplain of the Adeptus Astartes, sworn into my position with the grace of the Ecclesiarchy of Terra. In my presence, you have just expressed the notion that the Emperor of Mankind is not your god, as He is for the entire glorious Imperium. While I am not blind to the… separatist… elements within the Mechanicus, the fact remains that you are speaking heresy before a Reclusiarch of the Emperor's Chosen.

'You are speaking heresy, and I am charged with the responsibility of ending any heresy I encounter in the Eternal Crusade. So let us tread carefully, you and I. You will not insult me with false accusations of blasphemy, and I will answer the questions you have regarding D-16 West. This is not a request. Agree, or I will execute you for heresy before your crew can even soil themselves in fear.'

I see her swallow, and despite herself, her smile shows her amusement.

'It is entertaining to be spoken to in this manner,' she says, almost

thoughtful.

‘I can imagine that your perceptions offer a much grander view than mine,’ I meet her optic augments with my own gaze. ‘But the time for misunderstandings is over. Speak, Zarha. I will answer what you ask. This must be resolved, for the good of Helsreach.’

She turns in her tank, swimming slowly in the fluid-filled coffin before eventually coming back to face me.

‘Tell me why,’ she says. **‘Tell me why you have done this.’**

I had not expected such a base question. ‘It is the Ordinatus Armageddon. It is one of the greatest weapons ever wielded by man. This is a war, Zarha. I need weapons to win it.’

She shakes her head. **‘Necessity is not enough. You may not harness** Oberon **on a whim, Grimaldus.’** She floats closer, pressing her forehead to the glass. Throne, she looks tired. Withered, tired and without hope. **‘It is sealed now because it must be sealed. It is not used now because it cannot be used.’**

‘The Master of the Forge will determine that for himself,’ I tell her.

‘No. Grimaldus, please stop this. You will tear the Mechanicus forces on the world apart. It is a matter of the greatest import to the servants of the Machine-God. Oberon **cannot be reactivated. It would be blasphemy to use it in battle.’**

‘I will not lose this war because of Martian tradition. When Jurisian accesses the final chamber, he will examine the Ordinatus Armageddon and evaluate the trials ahead in awakening the spirit within the machine. *Help us*, Zarha. We do not have to die here in futility. Throne of the Emperor, *Oberon* would win us this war. Are you too blind to see that?’

She twists in the fluid again, seeming lost in thought.

‘No,’ she says at last. **‘It cannot, and will not, be reawakened.’**

‘It grieves me to ignore your wishes, princeps. But I will not have Jurisian cease his ministrations. Perhaps *Oberon*’s reactivation is far beyond his skills. I am prepared to die with that as an acceptable truth. But I will not die here until I have done all in my power to save this city.’

‘Grimaldus.’ She smiles again, looking much as she did at our first meeting. **‘I am ordered by my superiors to see you dead before you continue this course of action. This can only end one way. I ask you now, before the final threats must be spoken. Please do not do this. The**

insult to the Mechanicus would be infinite.’

I reach to my armoured collar and trigger the vox-link there. A single pulse answers – an acknowledgement signal.

‘You have made your third mistake by threatening me, Zarha. I am leaving.’

From the pilots’ thrones, voices begin to chatter. ‘My princeps?’ one calls.

‘Yes, Valian.’

‘We’re getting auspex returns. Four heat signatures inbound. From directly above. The city’s wall-guns are not tracking them.’

‘No,’ I say, without taking my eyes from Zarha. ‘The city defences wouldn’t shoot down four of my Thunderhawks.’

‘Grimaldus… No…’

‘My princeps!’ Valian Carsomir screams. ‘*Forget him!* We demand orders at once!’

It is too late. Already, the chamber starts to shake. The noise from outside is muted by the Titan’s immense armour plating, but remains nevertheless: four gunships on hover, their boosters roaring, black hulls eclipsing the moonlight that had beamed in through the eye-windows.

I look over my shoulder, seeing the four gunships align their heavy bolter turrets and wing-mounted missiles.

‘Raise shields!’

‘Don’t,’ I say softly. ‘If you try to raise the shields and prevent my attempt to leave, I will order my gunships to open fire on this bridge. Your void shields will never rise in time.’

‘You would kill yourself.’

‘I would. And you. And your Titan.’

‘Keep the shields down,’ she says, the bitterness returning to her visage. Her bridge crew comply, reluctance evident in their every movement and whispered word. **‘You do not understand. It would be blasphemy for** Oberon **to enter battle. The sacred war platforms must be blessed by the Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus. Their machine-spirits would be enraged without this appeasement.** Oberon **will never function. Do you not see?’**

I see.

But what I see is a compromise.

‘The only reason the Mechanicus is not committing one of its greatest

weapons to the war to save this world is because it remains unblessed?'

'Yes. The soul of the machine will rebel. If it even awakens, it will be wrathful.'

Within these words, I see the way through our stalemate. If their rites require a blessing that is impossible to give, then we must alter our demands to the most basic, viable needs.

'I understand, Zarha. Jurisian will not reactivate the Ordinatus Armageddon and bring it to Helsreach,' I tell her. She watches me closely, her visual receptors clicking and whirring in poor mimicry of human expression.

'He will not?'

'No.' The pause lasts several heartbeats, until I say, 'We will remove the nova cannon and bring it to Helsreach. It is all we needed, anyway.'

'You are not permitted to defile Oberon**'s body. To remove the cannon would be to sever its head or remove its heart.'**

'Consider this, Zarha, for I am finished with standing here and posturing over Mechanicus banalities. The Master of the Forge was trained on Mars, under the guidance of the Machine Cult and in accordance with the most ancient oath between the Adeptus Astartes and the Mechanicus. He reveres this weapon, and counts his role in its reawakening as the greatest honour of his life.'

'If he were true to our principles, he would not do this.'

'And if you were true to the Imperium, you would. Think on that, Zarha. We need this weapon.'

'The Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus is en route from Terra. If he arrives in time, and if his vessel can break the blockade, then there is a chance Helsreach will see Oberon **deployed. I can give you no more support than that.'**

'For now, that is all I need.'

I thought that would end it. Not end it *well*, by any means. But end it nevertheless.

Yet as I walk away, she calls me back.

'Stop for a moment. Answer me this one question: Why are you here, Grimaldus?'

I face her once more, this twisted, ancient creature in her coffin of fluids, watching me with machine-eyes.

‘Clarify the question, Zarha. I do not believe you speak of this moment.’

She smiles. **‘No. I do not. Why are you here, at Helsreach?’**

Strange to be asked such a thing, and I see no reason to lie. Not to her.

‘I am here because one who was brother to my dead master has sent me to die on this world. High Marshal Helbrecht demanded that one Templars commander stay to inspire the defence. He chose me.’

‘Why you? Have you not asked yourself that question? Why did he choose you?’

‘I do not know. All I know for certain, princeps, is that I am taking that cannon.’

‘I find it difficult to countenance,’ Artarion said, ‘that your plan actually worked.’ The knights stood together on the wall, watching the enemy. The aliens were massing, forming into clusters and chaotic regiments. It still resembled a swarm of vermin more than anything else, Grimaldus thought, but he could make out distinct clan markings and the unity of tribal groups standing apart from others.

It would be dawn soon. Whether or not that was the signal the xenos were waiting for didn’t matter. The flow of landers had fallen to a trickle, no more than one every hour now. The wastelands were already home to millions of orks. The attack would come today. The overwhelming force they needed to take the city was here.

‘It has not worked yet,’ Grimaldus replied. ‘Ultimately, it comes down to what they will allow. We need their cooperation.’ The Chaplain nodded to the gathering horde. ‘If we do not have Mechanicus aid in reactivating the cannon, these alien dogs will already be gnawing on our bones within a handful of months.’

A cry went up from further down the wall. Few Guardsmen remained posted on the battlements, and those that were served mainly as sentries. Two more of them shouted, and the call was taken up along the entire northern wall. The general vox-channel came alive with eager voices. The city’s siren once more began to wail.

Grimaldus said nothing at first. He watched the horde sweeping closer like a slow tide. What little order had been evident within the enemy’s ranks was broken now, and in the sea of jagged metal and green flesh, scrap-tanks and wreck-Titans powered forward – the former dense with aliens clinging to

their sides and howling, the latter shaking the wastelands with their waddling tread.

‘I have heard it said,’ Artarion noted, ‘that the greenskins raise their Titans as idols to their strange, piggish gods.’

Priamus grunted. ‘That would explain why they are so hideous. Look at that one. How can that be a god?’

He had a point. The wreck-Titan was an iron effigy of a corpulent alien, its distended belly used to house the arming chambers for the proliferation of cannons thrusting from its gut.

‘I would laugh,’ Nero said, ‘if there weren’t so many of them. They outnumber Invigilata’s engines at a ratio of six-to-one. ’

‘I see bombers,’ Cador noted, neither interested nor disinterested, merely stating a fact. A wing of ugly aircraft, over forty of them, rose from landing platforms hidden behind the landers of the main force. Grimaldus could hear their engines from here, labouring like a sick elder ascending the stairs.

‘We should abandon the walls, brothers.’ Nero turned to watch the last Guardsmen making their way down the ramps and ladders leading from the battlements. ‘The Titans will be firing soon.’

‘So will theirs,’ Priamus smiled within his helm. ‘And these mighty walls will be reduced to so much powder.’

At that moment, a squadron of fighters soared overheard – the sleek metal hulls of Barasath’s Lightnings turned silver by the reflections of the rising sun.

‘Now that is courage,’ said Cador.

Commander Barasath had argued long and hard for permission to make his first attack run. This was principally because anyone with even a vague grasp of tactics could see full well it would almost definitely be not only his first attack run, but also his last.

Colonel Sarren had been against it. Adjutant Tyro had been against it. Even the Emperor-damned dockmaster had been against it. Barasath was a patient man; he prided himself on tact and the willingness to deliberate being among his chief virtues, but to have to sit there and listen to a *civilian* complaining and questioning his tactical expertise was beyond galling.

‘Won’t we need your planes to protect the tankers still coming from the Valdez platforms?’ the dockmaster, Maghernus, had asked. Barasath gave

the man a feigned smile and a nod of acknowledgement.

‘It is unlikely the orks have the presence of mind to seek to cut our supplies of fuel, and even if they have, they would need to take the long route around the city, and risk running out of fuel themselves long before they reached our shipping lanes over the ocean.’

‘It is still not worth the risk,’ Sarren said, shaking his head and seeking to conclude the matter.

‘With all due respect,’ he said, none of his inner turmoil showing through to his demeanour, ‘This attack run offers us too much to merely dismiss out of hand.’

‘The risks are too great,’ Tyro said, and Barasath was fast coming to hate her. A petulant little princess from the Lord General’s staff – she should go back to her clerical duties and leave war to the men and women who were trained to deal with it.

‘War,’ Barasath mastered his temper, ‘is nothing but risk. If I take three-quarters of my squadron, we can destroy the enemy’s first waves of bombers and fighter support. They will never even reach the city.’

‘That is exactly why this is a fool’s errand,’ Tyro argued. She was less skilled at controlling her agitation. ‘The city’s defences will annihilate any aerial attack. We don’t even need to risk a single one of our fighters.’

My fighters, Barasath said silently.

‘Adjutant, I would ask you to consider the practicalities.’

‘I have,’ she scoffed.

Uppity bitch, he added to the previous thought.

‘This is a two-bladed attack that I suggest.’ Barasath looked at his fellow commanders gathered here in the briefing room. While the chamber itself was a bustling hive of activity, with staff and servitors manning vox-consoles, scanner decks and tactical displays, the main table that had once seated the entire city’s command section was almost deserted. Almost every regimental leader was with his or her soldiers now, standing ready.

‘I’m listening,’ Colonel Sarren said.

‘If we engage the enemy above the city, a great deal of burning wreckage will fall to the streets and spires below. Add to that the fact we will be under fire from our own defensive guns. Anti-air turrets on spires will be firing up at the sky battle, and have a significant chance of hitting my pilots with their flak-bursts. But if we take the fight to them, their precious junk-

fighters will rain down upon their own troops in flames. Once my first wave has pierced their formation, send a second and a third. We can cut overhead to perform strafing runs on their airstrips.'

Silence met this statement. Barasath capitalised on it. 'Their aerial capabilities will be butchered *in a single hour.* You cannot tell me, colonel, that such a victory isn't worth the risk. This is how we must strike.'

He could tell the colonel wasn't convinced. Tempted, yes, but not convinced. Tyro shook her head slightly, half in thought, half already preparing her advised refusal.

'I have spoken with the Reclusiarch,' Barasath said suddenly.

'What?' from both Sarren and Tyro.

'This plan. I have discussed it with the Reclusiarch. He commended me on it, and assured me that city command would allow it.'

Of course, Barasath had done no such thing. The last he'd heard of the knight leader was that Grimaldus was evidently involved in some sort of difficult negotiation with the Crone of Invigilata. But it turned Tyro's head, and that was all he needed. A wedge of doubt. A sliver of her interest.

'If Grimaldus advises this…' she said.

'Grimaldus?' Sarren arched an eyebrow. His jowly face was caught between amusement and alarm. 'A trifle familiar of you to use his name like that.'

'The Reclusiarch,' she swallowed. 'If he believes this is a sound plan, perhaps we should take that into consideration.'

Barasath was adept at hiding all emotion, not just the negative ones. He battled down the urge to grin now.

'Colonel,' he said, 'and Adjutant Tyro. I can see why you wish to hold as much of our forces in reserve as is tactically viable. This is a defensive war, and aggressive attacks will play little part in it. But my pilots and I are useless once the walls are breached and the enemy floods the city. Even the hololithic simulations made that clear, did they not?'

Sarren sighed as he linked his fingers over his belly.

'Do it,' he'd said. And Barasath had. His squadron was airborne an hour later, tearing over the city streets below before powering low over the wastelands.

In the tight confines of his Lightning's cockpit, he was more than just comfortable. He was home. Both control sticks in his hands were extensions

of his own body. They said infantry felt the same about their rifles, but by the Holy Throne, there was no comparison. A rifle to a Lightning was like a spear to an angel of iron and steel.

The mass of the alien invasion darkened the ground beneath them.

‘Need I remind anyone,’ he said over the squadron’s vox, ‘that bailing out over this mess is extremely ill-advised?’

A volley of ‘No sirs’ was his answer.

‘If you’re hit – and by the Throne, some of us will be – then bring your bird down into one of their fat-arsed god-walkers. Take as many of the bastards with you as you can.’

‘Gargants, sir.’ That was Helika’s voice. ‘The orks call their Titans “gargants”.’

‘Duly noted, Helika. Fifty-Eighty-Twos, on my mark, you will break formation and open fire. The Emperor is with us, boys and girls. And the Templars are watching. Let’s show them how we earned the knights’ crosses painted on our hulls.

‘For Armageddon,’ he narrowed his eyes, breathing in a lungful of the recycled oxygen offered by his facemask, ‘and Helsreach.’

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CHAPTER X

SIEGE

When the wall is first breached, it dies in an avalanche of pulverised rockcrete.

Dark powdery dust blasts into the air, thicker than smoke and expanding like a stormcloud, blinding in its density.

I watch this from hundreds of metres away, standing with my brothers and the soldiers of the Desert Vultures. At the end of the street, the wall is no more. Our defences are broken, and behind the dust cloud, the breach gapes wide.

The true siege has begun. On every rooftop, in every alley, on every street and from every window – for kilometres around – Imperial guns stand ready, clutched in loyal hands, ready to slay the invaders.

Road by road, home by home. This was always how the Battle of Helsreach would be fought, and it is what every soul in the city stands ready for.

The great figures of the Titans begin to withdraw. Their first duty is done; they stood at the walls and pounded the enemy forces with their immense artillery. Invigilata's engines fall back now, not in defeat, nor even willingly – but because they must reload for the true battle. The Crone updated the commanders' shared tactical grid with the locations of the Mechanicus landers within the city limits that serve as Invigilata's rearming stations. Her Titans trudge back to the closest ones now, their tread shaking the city around them. They are tall enough to darken the rising sun as they pass, even though they walk through distant streets.

Reports filter in from across the vox-network. The wall is falling to pieces,

crumbling under the insane firepower of so many tanks and wreck-Titans. Around me, the smell of fear rises from the human soldiers. It is a foul musk; the sourness of breath, the tangy reek of liquid waste, and the rich, stinging scent of cold sweat. This fear-smell emanates from several of them, and while I do not hold them to the standards of Adeptus Astartes, while I acknowledge the fact the human body will always react in this way even with the bravest of souls inhabiting it, it is still hard to stand in their presence. Their fear disgusts me.

Above the dust cloud, the head and shoulders of a wreck-Titan emerge, its bulbous head of scrap metal shaped into a roaring alien maw. Throne of the Emperor, it would have towered above the wall even if our insignificant barricade were still there. Glass shatters in every window along the street as its slow march brings it closer.

A moment later, the street thunders beneath our feet. Every one of the human soldiers with us falls to the ground, their curses lost amid the noise. I maintain my balance only because of my armour's joint stabilisers compensating for the tremors. With the brightness of a flaring sun, the wreck-Titan's head detonates, showering debris into the dust cloud below.

The cheer that rises around me is the loudest sound yet.

'Engine kill,' comes Zarha's voice over the vox, sounding amused despite the interference. **'You owe me for that, Grimaldus.'**

I do not answer. The shot must have been a truly difficult challenge, but I do not care where *Stormherald* is, nor that it is retreating. My focus is here and now. Tension burns through my body like superheated blood. I feel it in my brothers, as well. Twenty of us, our breathing fast, our hands clutching weapons that are ritually chained to our armour. Chainswords complain as they rev, cutting only air. Last-minute oaths are whispered, or sworn to the sky.

Emerging from the dust cloud, snorting their porcine war cries, come the hunched silhouettes of the enemy.

Hundreds of them, flooding into the street.

'Fire at will!' calls one of the Steel Legion officers.

'Hold your fire!' I scream, my helm's vocalisers piercing the surrounding noise.

'They're in range!' the officer, Major Oros, yells back.

'Hold your fire!'

I am already running, sprinting, my armour joints snarling as I leave the humans behind. Proximity runes, my brothers' life-markers, flicker on my retinal display, but I have no need for them. I know who follows me.

'Sons of Dorn! Knights of the Emperor! Charge!'

The first of the aliens runs from the dust, its green skin plastered grey from the cloud. It raises a junk weapon in its brutish fists, and dies with my crozius annihilating its malformed face a moment later.

The two battle lines meet with a discordant crunch of weapon against weapon and flesh against armour. The sick, fungal stench of ork blood fills the air. Chainswords chew through xenos flesh. Bolters discharge their lethal loads – the crashing bangs of release followed by the muffled thumps of shells detonating within bodies.

The creatures howl and laugh as they die.

My knights remain silent as they slaughter.

Perception fades, as it always does in war, to flickering images that come moment to moment. Concentration is impossible, anathema to the holy rage that fills my senses. I grip my master's relic weapon in both hands, and swing at three aliens before me. They are hurled back from the mace's crackling power field, all three slain by the impact with their chests shattered, each of them tumbling across the road to end in limp, lifeless heaps.

I kill, and kill, and kill. It does not concern me that there is no end to this horde. The enemy fall before us, thrown to the floor by the righteous arcs of sacred weapons, and all that matters is how much blood flows before we are forced to retreat.

Over the vox, I hear Oros and the men cheering. It is an easy sound to ignore.

Artarion suffers more than the rest of us. He sacrifices one hand to hold my banner aloft, his chainblade held in his other. The standard draws the enemy to him. *They want our banner. They always do.* Without even a grunt of effort, he hacks left and right, parries clumsy strikes and lashes back with vicious ripostes.

Priamus saw the danger first. I see one of the aliens behind Artarion fall in two pieces, the young knight's sword splitting the creature in twain through the torso. He kicks the biological wreckage from his blade and cleaves his way to fight side by side with Artarion.

‘Reclusiarch,’ Nerovar is still with me, tearing his sword free from the belly of a disembowelled greenskin. His boots crush the viscous, stinking ropes of intestine that spill to the road. ‘We are being overwhelmed.’

A spear crashes against my helm, reducing my visor display to static for a moment. I swing back at the creature that hurled it, and my sight flickers back online to see the beast’s skull demolished beneath my crozius. More discoloured blood spatters over my armour in a light rainfall.

Two more orks fall, one to Nero’s chainsword ripping across its throat, the other to my maul, hammered into its chest and sending it flying against the wall of a nearby building. Blood of Dorn, Mordred’s weapon is an incredible gift. It slays with effortless ease.

I can feel its charge and release with each alien that dies. There is a split second before every impact as the energy field around the head pulses in a low growl, conflicted by the closeness of other material, before it unleashes its force in a snapping burst of kinetic power.

The enemy have encircled us, but that is little worry. Fighting our way free will be no effort.

‘Oros,’ I breathe into the vox. ‘We are preparing to fall back to you.’

‘Give me the mark,’ he says. ‘We’re itching for a turn ourselves.’

With the true siege under way, the Imperial forces fell into their prepared defensive strategies.

Every road had a barricade, where Steel Legion soldiers arrayed in ranks would unleash las-fire at the swarming foe. Snipers worked their deadly duties from rooftops. Battle tanks of every pattern and class ground their way down streets, shelling the first waves of enemy infantry pouring into the outlying sectors of the city.

Every road and building had its assigned piece to play in the battle. Every section had its orders to hold and inflict as much punishment upon the advancing foe as possible, before falling back to the next barricade.

Rearmed Titans stood as vigilant sentinels over entire city blocks, their weapons reaping life from the creatures that swarmed around their feet. The enemy gargants were still engaged in pulling down and breaking through the wall. In these first hours, Invigilata was unrivalled in its destruction.

The invaders spilled into Helsreach, and died in their thousands. Every metre they took was bought with foul alien blood.

Colonel Sarren watched the battle unfolding on the hololithic table. Stuttering images relayed the position of Imperial forces at the very edges of the city, inexorably withdrawing from the walls. Larger locator runes showed the position of Invigilata's engines, or battalions of Steel Legion tanks. He had formulated this endless, relentless fighting withdrawal over the course of the past weeks, and by the Emperor, it was a fine thing to see it in action.

In this first phase, it was imperative that casualties be kept to a minimum. The grind of army against army would come in time. For now, losses must be kept light and the death toll suffered by the enemy must be kept high. Let the invaders claim the outlying city sectors. Let them purchase these abandoned, worthless zones with their lives. It was all part of the plan.

The wave would break soon.

Sarren watched the flickering icons depicting his forces across the immense map. It would come soon, that perfect moment in the shifting winds of battle when the enemy's first push would falter and slow as the advance elements outpaced their slower support units. The initial hordes of infantry would crash against Steel Legion resistance in the outer city streets that they could never break without support from their tanks and wreck-Titans.

And at that moment, the wave would break like the tide against the shore. With the ferocious momentum of the first attack lost, the defence would begin in earnest.

Counterattacks would be mounted in some streets, especially those close to Invigilata's engines or Legion armour units. In other zones, the Guard would stand fast, unable to take ground back but entrenched well enough to hold it.

All that mattered was keeping the enemy from reaching Hel's Highway.

At the last meeting, when the commanders had gathered in their battle armour, Sarren had outlined once more the necessity to holding the highway.

'It is the key to the siege,' he'd said. 'Once they reach Hel's Highway, the city becomes twice as difficult to defend. They will have access to the entire hive. Think of it as an artery, ladies and gentlemen. *The* artery. Once it is severed, the body will bleed out. Once the enemy takes the highway, the city is lost.'

Grave expressions had answered this statement.

The colonel hunched over the table now, his squinting eyes taking the scene in, road by road, building by building, unit by unit.

He watched the war in silence, waiting for the wave to break.

Barasath had hit the ground hard.

He'd seen Helika fall from the sky – and heard her, too. That'd been difficult to deal with. The night they'd spent together sharing a bunk had been almost three years ago now, when they'd both pretended to be drunker than they were, but Korten had never forgotten it, nor had he wished it to be the only one. Hearing her die had chilled his blood, and he had to fight not to deactivate his vox as she screamed on the way down, her engine trailing fire.

Her Lightning, with its white-painted wings, had ploughed into the chest of an alien god-walker. The Titan had shuddered for a moment, then vented flames and wreckage from its spine as Helika's bird – now nothing more than spinning debris – burst through its back.

The gargant kept walking as if unharmed, even with a hole blown clear through it.

That had been in the first run. Helika didn't even get time to fire.

A wicked, weaving scrap of a battle through the alien fighters saw most of them spiralling groundwards on dying engines. He'd taken cannon-fire along his hull, but a lucky shot saw him bleeding fuel instead of turned into a fireball in the sky. With the way clear and only a handful of his flyers down, Barasath's second and third waves were inbound.

That's when things had gotten really nasty.

The enemy god-walkers weren't marching idly. Turrets on their shoulders and heads aimed up into the sky spat both laser fire and solid shells at the Imperial fighters. Dodging these alone would have been a chore. Dodging these when they were joined by more ork scrap-flyers and anti-air fire from the tanks below turned the situation into the nightmare that Colonel Sarren had promised.

Barasath's first wave scattered, boosting towards the primitive landing strips the enemy had formed in the desert.

Hundreds of ork fighters still waited on the ground, unable to take off yet, consigned to waiting their turn on the scraped-flat runways. A more

pessimistic man might have noted there was little he could do to such a massive, grounded force when he led the remaining birds of an air superiority squadron. A more pessimistic man might also have circled the enemy airbase and waited for his Thunderbolt bombers in the second wave.

Korten Barasath was not a pessimistic man, and his patience took a backseat when it came to necessity. In graceful arcing dives and strafing runs, he unloaded his autocannons and drained his lascannon power packs, hurling everything he could down at the grounded fighters below. Dozens sought to take to the skies in panicked defence – most of these crashed during their ill-attempted takeoffs as their landing gear became fouled in the sandy wasteland soil. Those few that managed to get airborne were easy prey for Imperial cannons.

His second wave arrived, unleashing their payloads. Thunderbolts, much larger and heavier armed than the Lightnings, sent great plumes of smoke and dust rising from the wasteland's surface as their incendiaries impacted.

'Bomb this place to ashes,' Barasath voxed, and watched his pilots do exactly that.

Fire ripped across the wastelands in hungry trails, consuming the ragged airstrips that would never be allowed to take shape after this. Grounded junk-fighters exploded in succession.

Of course, the site wasn't completely defenceless, even with most of it in flames. A few tanks fired gamely up at the strafing Imperial flyers, with all the grace and accuracy of old men trying to swat flies.

He'd taken fire on his last banking swoop over the airbase. A lucky – or unlucky, as Barasath saw it – shot sheared off the best part of his left wing. There would be no climbing from this death-dive. No aiming for a wreck-Titan as Helika and a handful of others had done.

He pulled the cockpit release as the fighter started to spin, ditching above the burning site. There was a moment of disorientation, the push of the wind, the world coming into focus after the twisting plunge of the falling fighter… And then he was falling into black smoke and dust clouds.

Darkness embraced him. His respirator saved him having to breathe the choking smog, but his flight goggles were unenhanced and couldn't pierce the smoke. Barasath pulled his cord, feeling himself jerked upwards as his grav-chute opened.

With no idea where the ground was, he was lucky to hit the earth without

breaking both of his legs. His ankle flared up in protest, but he considered that to be getting off lightly.

Cautiously, aware of the fact that the smoke hid him as much as it hid the enemy, he pulled his laspistol and moved through the blinding darkness. It was hot, a savage heat all around him that spoke of burning planes and landers nearby, yet not enough light to offer direction.

When he finally broke through the black cloud, pistol in his sure grip, he blinked once at what stood before him, and started to fire.

'Oh Throne,' he said with surprising politeness, right before the orks lumbering ahead shot him through the chest.

Stormherald hungered.

It ached with each pounding step, its roiling plasma core burning in its chest as it reluctantly turned its back on the enemy and marched through the streets.

Its way was clear, its path already set. Buildings had been demolished earlier in the week – their foundations blown up and the hab-blocks themselves fallen to rubble – to make way for its passage.

The need to turn around and pour its hatred into the enemy was fierce, a hunter's urge, almost strong enough to overwhelm the Crone's whispers in its mind.

The Crone. Her presence was a savage irritant. Again, *Stormherald* leaned as it walked, seeking to turn with its ponderous, striding slowness. And again, the Crone's claws in its mind forced its body to comply with her intent.

We move, she whispered, *to fight a greater battle soon.*

Stormherald's rage faded at her voice. There was something new in her words, something its predator's mind clutched and recognised immediately. A fear. A doubt. A plea.

The Crone was weaker now than she ever had been before.

Stormherald knew nothing of pleasure or amusement. Its soul was forged in ancient rites of fire, molten metal, and plasmic energy that churned with the ferocity of a caged sun. The closest it came to an emotion approximating pleasure was the rush of awareness and the dimming of its painful anger as enemies died under its guns.

It felt a ghost of that sensation now. It complied with her urgings now, still

bound to her control.

But the Crone was weaker.

Soon, she would be his.

Nightfall found Domoska with her storm trooper platoon holed up in the ruins of what had once been a hab-block.

Greenskin heavy armour had rolled through and changed all that. Now it was a tumbledown ruin of rockcrete and flakboard, and Domoska crouched behind a low wall, clutching her hellgun to her chest. Strapped to her back, her power pack hummed. The cable-feeds between her hellgun's intake port and the backpack were vibrating and hot.

She was glad the skull-faced Adeptus Astartes and that prissy adjutant quintus had ordered them back to the city. She didn't want to admit it, but travelling in an Adeptus Astartes gunship – even just in the bay with the racked jump packs and attack bikes – had been a thrill.

She was less delighted with her platoon's assigned position in the urban war, but she was a storm trooper, the Legion's finest, and she prided herself on her devotion to duty without raising a complaint.

With the bulk of Imperial forces in slow, fighting withdrawals and protracted holding actions, units across the city were tasked with lying in wait as the orks advanced, or stalking past undetected to take positions behind the enemy.

Across Helsreach, it was almost uniformly veteran outfits and storm trooper squads tasked with these movements. Colonel Sarren was using his best soldiers to achieve the most difficult operations.

And it was working.

Domoska would have preferred to be safely crouched behind a barricade, with Leman Russ tanks in support, but such was life.

'Hey,' Andrej whispered as he ducked next to her. 'This is better than sitting on our arses in the desert, yes? Yes, it is, that's what I think.'

'Be quiet,' she whispered back. Her auspex returns were coming back clear. No enemy heat signatures or movement nearby. Still, Andrej was being annoying.

'The last one I gutted with my bayonet, eh? I am tempted to go back for his skull. Sand it down, wear it on my belt like a trophy. That would get me much attention, I think.'

‘It would get you shot first, most likely.’

‘Hm. Not the right kind of attention. You are too negative, okay? Yes, I said it. It is true.’

‘And I said to be quiet.’

Miraculously, he was. The two of them moved on, keeping crouched and low, moving from cover to cover. Sounds of battle were coming from the adjacent street – Domoska could hear the guttural roars and piggish snorts of embattled orks.

‘This is Domoska,’ she whispered into her hand-vox. ‘Contact ahead. Most likely the second group that passed us an hour ago.’

‘Acknowledged, Scout Team Three. Proceed as instructed, with all due caution.’

‘Yes, captain.’ Domoska clicked her vox off. ‘Ready, Andrej?’

Andrej nodded, crouched next to her once again. ‘I have three det-packs left, okay? Three more tanks must die. Then I get that caffeine the captain promised.’

The holographic table told its tale with reassuring accuracy. Sarren could not look away, despite how staring at the flickering light-images stung the eyes after a while.

The wave was breaking.

His bulwark units were digging in and holding their ground. Already, the pincer platoons were moving into position behind the first horde of invaders, ready to drive them forward and crush them between the hammer and anvil.

Sarren smiled. It had been a fine day.

Jurisian had not moved from his position in almost twenty-four hours.

He had said he would need over a week, and closer to two. He no longer believed this. This would take weeks, months… Perhaps even years.

The codes that kept the impenetrable bunker doors sealed were beautiful in their artistry – clearly the work of many masters of the Mechanicus. Jurisian feared no living being, and had slain in the name of the Emperor for twenty-three decades. This was the first time he had loathed his duty.

‘I need more time, Grimaldus,’ he had spoken into the vox several hours before.

‘You ask for the one thing I cannot give,’ the Reclusiarch had answered.

‘This might take me months. Perhaps years. As the code evolves, it breeds sub-ciphers that – in turn – require dedicated cracking. It breeds like an ecology, always changing, reacting to my intrusions by evolving into more complex systems.’

The pause had been laden with bitten-back anger. ‘I want that cannon, Jurisian. *Bring it to me.*’

‘As you will, Reclusiarch.’

Gone was the thrill of hoping to look upon *Oberon*, and being the soul to reawaken the great Ordinatus Armageddon. In its place was cold efficiency and undeniable disgust. This sealing code was one of the most complex creations humanity had pieced together from its various spheres of knowledge. Destroying it afflicted him with a pain akin to that which an artist would feel in destroying a priceless painting.

Runes spilled across his retinal display in green lettering. He solved six of the scrolling codes in the space of a single breath. The final five involved additional calculations based on the parameters established by the previous ones.

The code evolved. It reacted to his interference like a living thing, its ancient spirit fighting against his manipulations. So, so beautiful, Jurisian thought as he worked. Damn Grimaldus for asking this of him.

His servitors stood behind him, slack-jawed, dull-eyed and slowly starving to death.

Jurisian paid no heed.

He had a masterpiece to slay.

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CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST DAY

The shaking no longer bothered Asavan Tortellius.

His presence was an honour, and one he thanked the Mechanicus for in his daily prayers. In his eleven years of service, he'd quickly grown used to the shaking, the lurching tread, and even the rattling of weapons fire against the walls of his monastery. What Tortellius had never grown used to was the Shield.

In many ways, the Shield replaced the sky. He had been born on Jirrian – an unremarkable world in an unremarkable subsector a middling distance from Holy Terra. If Jirrian could be said to possess any attribute of note, it was its weather in the equatorial regions. The sky over the city of Handra-Lai was the deep, rich blue that poets spent so much time trying to capture in words, and imagists spent so much time trying to capture in picts. In a world of tedious tradition and the greyness of infinite societal equality – where everyone was just as poverty-stricken as everyone else – the skies above the slum hive Handra-Lai were the one aspect of his early life worth remembering.

The Shield had stolen that from him. He still had the memories, of course. But every year, they became duller, as if the Shield's overreaching presence caused all else to fade.

It wasn't that the Shield had any particular colour, because it didn't. And it wasn't that the Shield was brazenly oppressive, because it wasn't.

Most of the time it wasn't even visible, and at the best of times, it wasn't even *there*.

And yet, in a way, it always was. It was oppressive. It was always there. It

did discolour the sky. Its existence was betrayed by the abrasive electrical fizz in the air. Static would crackle between fingertips and metal surfaces. After a while, one's teeth began to ache. It was most irritating.

And to think that it could be raised any moment. Looking up at alien skies held no pleasure at all, and it was all because of the Shield. It severed any real enjoyment of the heavens. Even when deactivated, there was forever the risk of it slamming up into life without notice, cutting Tortellius off from the outside world once more.

In moments of battle, the Shield was more beautiful than threatening. It would ripple like breaking waves, the colours of oil on water cascading across the sky. The smell of the Shield as it suffered attack was a heady clash of ozone and copper that, if one stood outside on the monastery's battlements, would actually begin to make you feel light-headed after a time. Tortellius made a point of standing outside when the Shield was under siege, not for the stimulant effects of the Shield's electrical charge, but because it was a dark pleasure to see his prison's limits, rather than fear the invisible oppression.

Sometimes he would wonder if he was watching it in the secret hope it would fail. If the Shield came down… then what? Did he truly desire such a thing? No. No, of course not.

Still. He did wonder.

As he leaned on the battlements of the monastery, watching the city below, Tortellius reflected on the loathsomeness of this particular breed of xenos. The greenskins were filthy and bestial, their intelligence generously described as rudimentary, and more accurately as feral.

The mighty *Stormherald,* instrument of the God-Emperor's divine will, had come to a halt. Tortellius noticed only because of the relative silence in the wake of its crashing tread.

His monastery, only part of the cathedral of spires and battlements adorning the Titan's hunched shoulders, remained silent. Fifty metres below, he could hear the rattling of the leg turrets killing the aliens in the street. But the domed weapon mounts – each one bristling with granite gargoyles and stone representations of the angelic primarchs, those blessed slain sons of the God-Emperor – merely moved in their set alignments, their cannons ready.

Tortellius scratched his thinning hair (a curse he blamed entirely on the

harsh electro-static charge of the Shield), and summoned his servo-skull. It hovered along the battlements towards him, its miniature suspension technology purring as it stayed aloft. The skull itself was human, sanded smooth and modified after it was removed from a corpse, now showing augmetic pict-takers and a voice-activated data-slate for recording sermons.

'Hello, Tharvon,' said Tortellius. The skull had once belonged to Tharvon Ushan, his favoured servant. How noble a fate, to serve the Ecclesiarchy even in death. How blessed Tharvon's spirit must be, in the eternal light of the Golden Throne.

The skull probe said nothing. Its gravity suspensors hummed as it bobbed in the air.

'Dictation,' said Tortellius. The skull emitted an acknowledgement chime as its data-slate – no larger than a human palm and built into its augmented forehead – blinked active.

What little breeze penetrated the Shield wasn't enough to cool his sweating face. The Armageddon sun might have been weak compared to the star that burned down on equatorial Jirrian, but it was stifling enough. Tortellius mopped his dark-skinned brow with a scented kerchief.

'On this, the first day of the Siege of Hive Helsreach, the invaders have spilled into the city in unprecedented numbers. No, hold. Command word: Pause. Delete "unprecedented". Replace with "overwhelming". Command word: Unpause. The skies are clogged with pollution from the world's industry, flak hanging in the clouds from the hive's defences, and smoke from the outlying fires that ravage the outermost districts where the invaders have already conquered ground.

'It is my belief that few chronicles of this immense war will survive to be interred in Imperial archives. I make this record now not out of a desire to spread my name in pomposity, but to accurately detail the holy bloodshed of this vast crusade.'

Here he hesitated. Tortellius struggled for the words, and as he chewed his lower lip, musing over dramatic description, the monastery shook beneath his feet again.

The Titan was moving.

Stormherald strode through the city, its passage unopposed.

Three enemy engines – the scrap-walkers that the aliens called gargants –

had already died to its guns. In her prison of fluid, Zarha felt the stump at the end of her arm aching with a dull heat.

Once, she thought with an ugly smile, I had hands.

She aimed her next thought with care. *The annihilator is overheating.*

‘The annihilator is overheating.’

‘Understood, my princeps,’ replied Carsomir. He twitched in his restraint throne, accessing the status of the weapon through his hardwired link to the Titan’s heart-systems. ‘Confirmed. Chambers three through sixteen show rising temperature pressure.’

Zarha turned in her milky coffin, feeling instinctively what every other soul on board needed to perceive through calculations on monitors or slower hardwire links. She watched Carsomir twitch again, feeling the orders pulsing from his mind through willpower alone, reaching into the cognitive receptors at the Titan’s core. ‘Coolant flush, moderate intensity,’ he said. ‘Commencing in eight seconds.’

Zarha moved her right arm in the ooze, feeling pain in fingers that no longer existed.

‘Flushing coolant,’ said a nearby adept, hunched over his wall-mounted control panel.

The relief was immediate and blissful, like a sunburned hand plunged into a bucket of ice. She cancelled the vision feed from her photoreceptors, immersing herself in blackness as relief washed through her arm.

Thank you, Valian.

‘Thank you, Valian.’

Her vision flickered back into existence as she reactivated her optical implants. It was the work of a moment to readjust her perceptions, filtering out the immediacy of her surroundings. She took a breath, and stared out across the city with a god’s eyes.

The enemy, ant-like and amusing, swarmed in the street around her ankles. Zarha lifted her foot, feeling both the rush of air on her metallic skin and the swirling of fluid around her footless limb. The aliens fled from her crushing tread. A tank died, pounded into scrap.

Incidental fire from *Stormherald*’s leg battlements spilled into the road, cutting the orks down in droves.

‘My princeps,’ Moderati Secundus Lonn was twitching in his throne as he spoke, his muscles spasming in response to the flood of pulses from his

connection to the Titan.

Speak, Lonn.

‘Speak, Lonn.’

‘We are venturing ahead of our skitarii support.’

Zarha was not blind to this. She hunched her shoulders, wasted muscles tensed and trembling, striding forward through the street.

I know. I sense… something.

‘I know. I sense something.’

The hab-towers on either side of the marching Titan were abandoned – this sector was one of the few lucky enough to be within easy range of the city’s scarce subterranean communal bunker complexes.

Inform Colonel Sarren I am pressing ahead with phase two.

‘Inform Colonel Sarren I am pressing ahead with phase two.’

‘Yes, my princeps.’

This sector, Omega-south-nineteen, had been one of the first to fall when the walls came down the day before. The aliens had been crawling through the area for many hours, but significant scrap-Titan strength was – as yet – unseen. It represented the perfect opportunity to slaughter legions of the enemy while their gargant groups were engaged elsewhere.

A feeling grew in the back of her head – something invasive and sharp, blooming through the webbing of veins in her brain. It was something she had not heard in many, many decades.

Someone was weeping.

Zarha felt her face locked in a rictus as the feeling blossomed and grew fangs. The sharpness was jagged now, an acidic pulse through her skull.

‘My princeps?’

She didn’t hear at first.

‘My princeps?’

Yes, Valian.

‘Yes, Valian.’

‘We’re receiving word from *Draconian.* He’s dying, my princeps.’

I know… I feel him…

A moment later, Zarha felt the full shock grasp at her senses. The mortis-cry slashed through her cognitive link like a hurricane, shrieking at a soundless pitch of pain. *Draconian* was down. The princeps aboard her, Jacen Veragon, was screaming as the aliens scuttled over his corpse, pulling

at his armoured metal skin as he lay prone.

How had he fallen?

And there it was. In the screaming cry was the memory she sought. The lurching of vision as the Reaver-class engine was dragged to its knees. The sense of infuriating immobility. He was a god… How could this happen… Why would his limbs no longer function…

Everywhere around was rubble and smoke. It was impossible to see clearly.

The scream was fading now. *Draconian*'s reactor-heart, a boiling cauldron of plasmic fusion, was growing cold and still.

'We've lost contact,' said Valian, a second after Zarha sensed it herself. She was weeping, though the saltwater secreted from her tear ducts was immediately dissolved in the fluid entombing her.

Lonn had his eyes closed, accessing an internal hololithic display within the cognitive link. '*Draconian* was in Omega-west-five.' His dark eyes flicked open. 'Reports show the site is the same as here: evacuated habitation towers, minimal engine resistance.'

The adept manning the scanning console, his mouth replaced by a scarab-like vocaliser, blurted a screed of machine code across the cockpit.

'Confirmed,' Carsomir said. 'We're getting an auspex return to the south. Significant heat signature. Almost definitely an enemy engine.'

Zarha heard almost none of this. Images of *Draconian*'s death played out behind her false eyes like scenes from a play, coloured by the stinking taint of black emotion beneath. She sobbed once, her heart aching like it would burst. Hearing only that an enemy was nearby, she walked in the fluid, her limbs moving.

The Titan shook as it took another step.

'My princeps?' both moderati said at once.

I will have vengeance. Even in her own mind, she could barely hear herself in the words. A mechanical overtone twinned with her thoughts – and it was protective in its overwhelming rage. *I will have vengeance.*

'We will have vengeance.'

Tower blocks passed by its shoulders as the Titan strode on.

'My princeps,' began Carsomir, 'I recommend we hold here and wait for the skitarii to scout ahead.'

No. I will avenge Jacen.

‘No,’ the vox-voice was harsh. **‘We will avenge** Draconian.**’**

Blind to the disparity between her thoughts and the emerging voice, Zarha pushed onwards. Voices assailed her, but these she cast aside with a brush of willpower. Never before had she felt it so easy to disregard the chattering, needy voices of her lesser kin. Valian’s voice, coming from the cockpit chamber rather than the cognitive link, was another matter.

‘My princeps, we are receiving requests for Communion.’

There will be no Communion. I hunt. Communion with the Legio can come tonight.

‘There will be no Communion. We hunt. Communion with the Legio can come tonight.’

With effort, Valian turned around in his restraint throne. The cables snaking from his skull’s implant sockets turned with him, like a beast’s many tails.

‘My princeps, Princeps Veragon is dead and the Legio demands Communion.’ In his voice was the edge of concern, but never panic, nor fear. The rest of the battle group desired the momentary sharing of focus and purpose – the unity of princeps and the souls of their engines – that was tradition in the aftermath of loss.

The Legio will wait. I hunger.

‘The Legio will wait. We hunger.’

Forwards. Ready main weapons. I smell the xenos from here.

Her voice emerged as a crackle of static, but *Stormherald* marched on.

While Carsomir was not a man prone to extremes of emotion, something cold and uncomfortable crawled through his thoughts as he turned back to watch the cityscape through the Titan’s huge eye lenses.

He may not have been as connected to *Stormherald*’s burning heart as the princeps was, but his own bonds with the god-walker were not devoid of intimate familiarity. Through his weaker tie to the engine’s semi-sentient core, he felt a depth of fury that was almost addictive in its all-encompassing purity. The passion transferred through his empathic link into grim irritability, and he had to resist the urge to curse the inefficiency of those around him as he guided the Titan onwards. Knowing the cause of his distracted irritation was no balm for it.

The Titan’s right foot came down on a street corner, pulverising a cargo conveyer truck into flat scrap. *Stormherald* turned with a majestic lack of

speed, and hull-mounted pict-takers panned to show a wider avenue, and the afternoon sunlight glinting from *Stormherald*'s burnished iron skin. Valian was immersed, just for a moment, in the wash of exterior imagery fed through the mind-link. Hundreds of pict-takers, each one showing pristine silvery skin, or dense armour – cracked and pitted with its legacy of small arms fire.

Ahead, down the wide avenue, was the enemy engine that blinked like a red-smeared migraine on the cockpit's auspex scanners. Valian shuddered at the sight of it, breathing deeply of the scent-thick cockpit air. As always, living within *Stormherald*'s head smelled of oiled gears, ritual incense and the burning reek of crew members sweating and bleeding, their bodies exerted despite remaining motionless in their thrones.

The enemy scrap-Titan was grotesque – unappealing on a level that went far beyond mere design distaste to Valian. Its junk metal appearance showed no reverence, no respect, no care in its construction. *Stormherald*'s iron bones were thrice-blessed by tech-ministers even before they were brought together as the skeleton of a god-machine. Each of the million cogs, gears, rivets and plates of armour used in the Imperator's birth was honed to perfection and blessed before becoming part of the Titan's body.

This avatar of perfection incarnate faced its hideous opposite, and every crewmember piloting the Titan felt disgust flow through them. The enemy engine was fat, big-bellied to hold troops and ammunition loaders for its random array of torso cannons. Its head, in opposition to the Gothic-style machine skull worn by *Stormherald,* was stunted and flat, with cracked eye lenses and a heavy-jawed underbite. It stared pugnaciously down the street at the larger Imperial walker, its cannons covering its body like spines, and roared a challenge of its own.

It sounded exactly like what it was: an alien warleader within the cockpit head blaring into a vox-caster. *Stormherald* laughed in response, its warning sirens slamming back with a wall of sound.

In her tank of fluids, Zarha raised her arms, her handless stumps facing forward.

In the street, with an immense grinding of gear joints, *Stormherald* mirrored the motion.

It never fired. The trap, as crude and simple as it was, exploded around the great Titan.

‘Your request for reinforcement is acknowledged,’ the voice crackled.

Ryken lowered the vox-mic, readying his lasrifle again.

‘They’re coming,’ he hissed to Vantine. The other trooper was with him, crouched with her back to the wall, sharing his slice of cover. Her expression was unreadable, masked by her goggles and rebreather, but she gave the major a nod.

‘You said that half an hour ago.’

‘I know.’ Ryken slammed a fresh cell into his lasgun. ‘But they’re coming.’

The wall behind them buckled as it took the brunt of another shell. Debris from the ceiling clattered down onto their helmets.

Ryken’s platoon were up to their necks in trouble, and no amount of hard fighting alone was going to get them out of it. Most of his men, the ones that weren’t bleeding to death on the ground, were at the windows on the various floors of this hab-block, pouring their fire into the street outside. The rooms were still full of furniture, left by the families who were taking shelter in local underground bunkers. It was, as last stands went, a pretty terrible place to be holed up in, but their barricade had fallen half an hour before, and it was every squad for themselves until they could regroup at the next junction.

The problem was that Ryken’s platoon was cut off much too fast when the last bastion fell. As rearguard covering the other squads’ escapes, they’d been encircled and forced to find whatever cover they could.

‘They’re climbing the damn walls!’ someone cried out. Ryken scrambled to the nearest window, keeping low and bracing to fire into the street again. As he rose to fire, he found himself face to face with a green-skinned creature hauling its way through the second-storey window. It reeked of mould and gunsmoke, and its piggish eyes were glazed by whatever alien emotions it felt in the heat of battle.

Ryken bayoneted the beast in the throat, firing three shots even as he stabbed. The alien was hurled back from the window to fall on its companions below.

They were indeed climbing the damn walls.

Ryken ordered three of his men to cover the window, and raced for the stairs leading down to the ground floor. The snapping *crack* of lasrifles firing was even louder from downstairs, where the bulk of the platoon was

entrenched.

‘Reinforcements are en route!’ he called down the stairs.

‘You said that half an hour ago!’ Sergeant Kalas called back up.

Ryken caught a glimpse of the sergeant, his bolt pistol clutched in a two-handed grip, kneeling at a window and firing booming shots out into the road. He retreated back to a nearby window himself, adding his fire to the onslaught.

In the street, a riot of alien flesh was taking place. Only the most foolish or bloodthirsty orks were seeking to race across the road and scale the building’s walls. Most of the xenos – and Ryken thanked the Emperor for small mercies – possessed enough intelligence to remain in cover themselves, behind their own junk-transports or shooting from windows of adjacent habitation blocks. They laughed and jeered as the barrage continued, and great howls of porcine laughter would rise up when another pack of baying aliens would charge across the street only to be cut down by the Steel Legion’s defences. Raucous enjoyment of their own kin’s death was a barbarous madness Ryken had long come to associate with this accursed xenos breed.

There was no understanding such creatures.

‘We can’t hold here,’ Vantine crouched under cover again, whispering a rapid litany of devotion as she reloaded her rifle. ‘You hear those engines? More are coming, major.’

‘We’re not breaking out anytime soon,’ he spoke the words as a bitter curse, setting his rebreather straight. ‘So we *will* hold.’

‘Or we die.’

‘That’s not an option, and I’ll shoot you the next time you give voice to it.’

She smiled behind her own gas mask, but Ryken saw none of it. He had risen to his feet and was leaning against the wall, his lasgun braced against his chest. He kept close to the wall, risking a look out of the window. What he saw made him curse more colourfully than Vantine had ever heard before.

‘So,’ she rose close to him, taking position on the other side of the window, ‘not good news, then?’

‘Tanks. The bastards are rolling armour up the road.’

Vantine chanced a look herself. Three tanks, Imperial Leman Russ chassis looted and ‘improved’ with crooked armour panels bolted on and painted in

mismatched hues. The jagged fronts of the three tanks showed alien glyphs of allegiance that meant nothing to human eyes.

‘We’re dead,’ she shook her head. ‘And there’s no need to shoot me. They’ll shell this block to rubble and do it for you.’

Ryken ignored her. ‘Nikov,’ he keyed his vox-bead live. ‘Nikov, how’s the launcher coming?’

Nikov was on the hab-block’s top floor, where he’d retreated with his missile launcher ten minutes before. The weapon had taken a beating when the barricade had fallen earlier.

‘It’s still jammed,’ Nikov’s reply came over the vox in a crackling hiss. After a pause of several moments, he added, ‘Did I hear you shouting about reinforcements again?’

‘They’re coming! Throne, why is everyone whining about that?’

‘I think it’s because we’d rather not die, sir.’

The west wall chose that moment to explode. Debris burst into the room, filling it with stone dust. Through his goggles, Ryken stared at a hole the size of three grown men in the hab-block’s wall. Most of the soldiers nearby picked themselves up off the floor. Two stayed where they were, mangled and unmoving.

‘Get that launcher working,’ Ryken said in the moment of eerie calm. Vantine scrambled to her feet and ran from the gaping hole in the wall.

Outside offered alien laughter, the grinding of tank treads and a distant thrum of racing engines.

‘More?’ Vantine called out.

‘That’s not the enemy,’ Ryken said. ‘Those aren’t tank engines.’

And they weren’t. His vox-bead screeched a distorted chatter of mixed channels, but one voice broke through. ‘Your request for reinforcement,’ it said, much too deep to be human, ‘is acknowledged.’

The room darkened as the gunship rattled past on whining turbines. It swooped low, strafing the street, opening up with its weapons. From its cruising angle, it clearly didn’t intend to stay long, but the pilot was inflicting all the punishment he could while the Thunderhawk remained.

Heavy bolters mounted on its wings and cheeks spat a torrent of lethal shells into the visible groups of enemy warriors. Inhuman blood misted the air as packs of the creatures burst under the explosive ammunition. Snarling, the diminishing groups of survivors returned fire – their stubbers

chattering, the solid shells raining off the black gunship's hull like harmless hail.

The tanks were another matter. The first shell crashed into the gunship's side with a storm's force, and Ryken flinched back from the detonation. It spun the gunship on its axis, sending burning wind breathing from its boosters as it turned. In reaction to the attack, the avian shape gained altitude in a sudden thrust, banked over the first of the tanks, and at last dropped its cargo.

Dark figures clanged onto the surface of the tanks, as black as beetles crawling on the metal skin.

The first to fall – a figure on the roof of the lead tank – wore a silver-faced helm and wielded a mace with a sparking power field around its eagle-winged head. The weapon descended in a slice to shatter the vehicle's turret. It broke clean off and fell into the horde of aliens that mobbed the tanks from below.

'Good morning, Reclusiarch,' Ryken's voice was breathless with relief.

The knight didn't answer at first. He and his standard bearer were already engaged by the greenskins swarming up over the useless tank's hull, clambering higher in a desperate need to shed the blood of the black knights.

Artarion's bolter emitted its stuttering crash, blowing the aliens back down to the street. With the brilliance of a sun-flare, Grimaldus's plasma pistol disintegrated two of the climbing beasts, letting their burning skeletal remains tumble in pieces back into the horde.

The second tank was dead in its tracks, smoke pouring from vents and cracks in its armour. The Templars had dropped grenades into the interior, and Ryken saw two knights leaping clear, ignoring the slain vehicle as they waded into the aliens massing on the street.

'Forgive the delay, major.' The Reclusiarch wasn't even out of breath. 'We were required at the barricade breaches in south section ninety-two.'

'Better late than never,' Ryken replied. 'The last word from central command suggested that Sarren's plan in this sector was working better than almost all hololithic estimations. Are we getting redeployed for a counter-attack?'

On top of the tank, Grimaldus swung his mace in a vicious arc, pummelling an ork into ruined biological matter.

‘You are still breathing, major. Let that be enough for now.’

Dawn has brought nothing more than a continuation of the night’s bloodshed.

The Helsreach Crusade begins its first bloody day. Across the city, millions of us now fight for our lives.

The noise is like no other sound I have ever heard. In two centuries of life, I have waged war at the heels of god-machines whose weapons were louder than the death-cries of stars. I have stood against armies of thousands, while every soul that stood against us screamed their hatred. I have seen a ship the size of a hive tower crash into the open ocean on a far distant world. The plume of water it threw into the sky and the tidal wave that followed were like some divine judgement come to flood the land and erase all humanity beneath its salt-rich depths.

Yet nothing has matched the sound of Helsreach’s defiance.

In every street, humans and aliens clash, with their weapons and voices merging into a gestalt wave of senseless noise. On every rooftop, turrets and multi-barrelled defence cannons bark into the sky, their loaders never ceasing, their rate of fire never slowing. The machine-roars of Titans duelling can be heard from entire districts away.

Never before have I heard an entire city fighting a war.

As we fight to clear the streets of Major Ryken’s besiegers – and as the Legionnaires themselves leave their havens and join us in the slaughter – I keep an edge of focus for the general vox-channels.

Ryken was not wrong. While we are locked in our planned fighting withdrawal across the entire hive, precious few sectors are in unplanned retreat.

The wreck-Titans are in the city now. Coldly delivered kill ratios from Invigilata commanders are a recent addition to the chaos of communication traffic, but they are a welcome one. Helsreach stands defiant as the sun rides the sky into noon.

My brothers remain scattered across the city, reinforcing the weakest parts of the Imperial chain, supporting the defences where the orkish tide breaks into the city with overwhelming force. I regret that we did not have the chance to gather together one last time. Such a lost opportunity is another of the failings I must atone for.

The reports of their engagements reach me hourly. As yet, no casualties blacken our record. I cannot help but wonder who the first to fall will be, and how long the hundred of us will last as the hours become days, and the days become weeks.

This city will die. All that remains to be learned is just how long we can defy fate. And above all, I want the weapon buried beneath the wasteland's sands.

I am drawing breath to recall our gunship when the vox explodes with panic. It is difficult to make any sense from the maelstrom of noise. Key words manage to break through the mess: Titan. Invigilata. *Stormherald.*

And then, a voice so much stronger than all others, speaking a single word. She sounds in pain as she says it.

'Grimaldus.'

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CHAPTER XII

IN A PRIMARCH'S SHADOW

The gunship bursts across the sky, rattling around us in its ferocious race southwards. It is all too easy to imagine the thick Armageddon clouds left in turmoil in our wake.

Wind roars into the crew compartment through the open bulkhead door. As is my right, I am first at the portal, gripping the edge of the airlock with one hand as the wind claws at my tabard and parchment scrolls. Beneath us, the city slides by – towers aiming up, streets laid flat. The former are aflame. The latter are flooded by ash and the enemy.

Already, many of the city's outermost sectors are burning. Helsreach is what it is: an industrial city devoted to the production of fuel. There is much that will burn, here.

The flames choke the sky as the ring of fire swallowing the hive's edges creeps ever inwards. Reports of refugees spilling into the city's core have increased tenfold. Housing them is no longer even the greatest problem; the trouble in the avenues where the civilians flock is that Sarren's redeployment of his armour divisions suffers crippling congestion.

I do not judge him for this. His mastery of the city after arriving in the final weeks – only barely before we did – has been as efficient as could be expected from a human mind under such duress. I recall the initial briefings, when he was stifled by large sections of the civilian populace refusing to abandon their homes even in the face of invasion. In truth, it is not as if the city was built with an abundance of bunkers to house refugees anyway. With reluctance, he had allowed them to remain where they were, knowing the problem was – in part – a self-correcting one. As districts fell

to the invaders, the civilian death toll would be catastrophic.

‘Well,’ he had said one night to the gathered commanders, ‘it will mean fewer refugees in the siege itself.’

I had admired him greatly in that moment. His merciless clarity was most commendable.

With a lurch, the Thunderhawk begins its descent. I brace myself, whispering words of reverence to the machine-spirit within the propulsion engines now attached to my armour. The jump pack is bulky and ancient, the metal pitted and scarred and in dire need of repainting, but its link to my armour is without flaw. I blink-clink the activation rune, and the hum of the backpack’s internal systems joins the growl of my active armour.

I see *Stormherald.*

Over my shoulder, Artarion sees the same. ‘Blood of Dorn,’ he says, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

The entire scene is tainted by the grey dust clouds in the air from fallen buildings. In this cloud of grey, half buried in the debris of the exploded buildings, the Titan kneels in the street.

Sixty metres of walking lethality – an unstoppable weapons platform with the ornate cathedral adorning its shoulders – *kneels in the street*, defeated. Around it is the devastation of several fallen habitation towers. The invaders, curse their soulless lives, had set the surrounding hab-blocks to detonate and collapse on the Titan.

‘They have brought an Emperor-class Titan to its knees,’ Artarion says. ‘I never thought I would live to see such a thing.’

Hundreds of them swarm the streets now, climbing onto the defeated god-machine’s back with grappling hooks and boosting up there on burning thruster packs. They crawl across its dust-coated armour like insectile vermin.

‘Grimaldus,’ the Titan hails me, and suddenly it is so obvious why the voice is pained. Not from agony. From shame. She has advanced ahead of her skitarii phalanxes, and is undefended against this massed infantry assault.

‘I am here, Zarha.’

‘I feel them, like a million spiders across my skin. I… cannot stand. I cannot rise.’

‘Make ready,’ I vox to my brothers. Then, to the humbled princeps, ‘We

are about to engage the enemy.’

‘I feel them,’ she says again, and I cannot tell from her machine-voice if she is bitter, delirious, or both. **‘They are killing my people. My prayer-speakers… My faithful adepts…’**

I am not blind to the meaning in her words. To the Machine Cult, each death was more than a mortal tragedy – it was the loss of knowledge and perspective that might never be recovered.

‘They are inside me, Grimaldus. Like parasites. Violating the Cathedral of Sanctuary. Climbing inside my bones. Drilling towards my heart.’

I do not reply to her as I watch the crumbled cityscape below. Instead, I tense myself for a moment’s sensory dislocation, and hurl myself out into the sky.

Grimaldus was first to leap from the circling Thunderhawk.

Artarion, ever his shadow and still bearing his banner, was only seconds behind. Priamus, his blade in hand, came next. Nerovar and Cador followed, the first of them leaping into a dive, the latter merely stepping out in an uncomplicated plummet. Last of all was Bastilan, the sergeant’s insignia on his helm catching the dull evening light. He voxed to the pilot, wishing him well, and drew his weapons before falling into air.

Altitude gauges on retinal displays showed fast-falling numbers, the digital readouts a blur as the knights dropped from the sky. Beneath them, the kneeling god-machine presented a huge target. The multi-levelled cathedral on its shoulders was like a city in miniature – a city of spires – bristling with weapons batteries and crawling with alien vermin.

The knights saw the aliens as they descended: the beasts clambering up on tethered lanyards, or flying up on primitive rocket packs, laying siege to the stricken Titan. *Stormherald* itself was a pathetic statue depicting its own failure. It was driven to one knee, buried to the waist in the debris of six or seven fallen hab-block towers. The avenue was in ruin around it, where the detonated buildings had collapsed and levelled the city flat. The Titan’s arm-guns, as large as some habitation towers themselves, were grey-white with dust and resting on the mounds of broken brick, twisted steel supports, and rockcrete stone.

Grimaldus held off firing his boosters to slow his freefall.

‘Come down in the courtyard in the centre of the cathedral,’ he voxed to the others. Their acknowledgements came immediately. In turn, each of them engaged their jump packs, arresting their dives into more controlled descents.

Grimaldus was the last to fire his boosters, and the first to hit the ground.

His boots thudded onto the paved courtyard, smashing the precious mosaics into gravel beneath his feet. Immediately, he leaned to the side, compensating for the angle of the ground. *Stormherald*’s defeated posture was tilting the entire cathedral forward almost thirty degrees.

The courtyard was modest, ringed by nine plain marble statues that each stood four metres tall. In each of the cardinal directions, a set of open doors led into the cathedral itself. The mosaic tiles on the floor depicted the black and white bisected, cyborged skull of the Machine Cult of Mars. Grimaldus had come down onto the dark eye socket of the skull’s human side, crushing the black tiles to powder underfoot.

Nothing moved nearby. The sounds of battle, of looting, of desecration – these all came from within the surrounding building.

Priamus landed with a skid, his armoured boots tearing at the mosaics and shearing them off in a wave of broken pebbles. His blade, chained to his wrist, crackled into life.

Nerovar, Cador and Bastilan were altogether more graceful in their landings. The sergeant came down in the shadow of one of the tilted statues. Its stern face eclipsed the setting sun.

‘These are the primarchs,’ he said to the others as they readied their weapons.

All heads turned towards Bastilan. He was right.

As representations of the primarchs went, they were plain to the point of almost being crude. The sons of the Emperor were usually depicted in grandeur and glory, rather than by sculptures so subtle and austere.

There was Sanguinius, Lord of the Blood Angels, prominently unwinged, with a childlike face lowered in repose. And there, Guilliman of the Ultramarines, his robed form so much slenderer than any other depiction of him that the knights had seen before. In one hand, he clutched an open tome. The other was raised to the sky, as if he were caught and forever frozen in a moment of great oratory.

Jaghatai Khan was bare-chested, bearing a curved blade in his hands and

looking to the left, as if staring at the distant horizon. His hair was shaggy and long, whereas in so many masterpieces it was shaven but for a topknot. Next to him, Corax, the Prince of Ravens, wore a plain mask that was utterly featureless but for the eyes. It was as if he were unwilling to show his face in the company of his brothers, hiding his visage behind an actor's mask.

Ferrus Manus and Vulkan shared a plinth. The brothers were bareheaded, and the only two primarchs sculpted here in armour. Both wore vests of mail, the fine links of chain on Manus's breast a counterpoint to the larger scales adorning Vulkan's. They stood back to back, facing in opposite directions, both carved to bear hammers in each hand.

Leman Russ of the Wolves stood with legs apart, head cast back, facing the sky. Whereas the other sons of the Emperor wore robes or armour, Russ was clad in rags sculpted over his chiselled musculature. He was also the only primarch with tensed fists, as if he stared into the heavens, awaiting some grim arrival.

A robed figure, hooded yet visibly slender to the point of emaciation, clutched the hilt of a winged blade, its tip between the statue's bare feet. Here was the Lion, depicted as a warrior-monk, eyes closed in silent contemplation.

And, last of all, rising above Bastilan, was Rogal Dorn.

Dorn stood apart from his brothers, neither facing his kin, nor looking into the skies above. His regal visage was aimed at the ground to his left, as if the primarch stared at something vital only he could see. The robe he wore was plainer than those adorning his brothers' icons, though it showed a cross on its breast, sculpted with care. Although he had been the Golden Lord, the commander of the Imperial Fists, his personal heraldry had inspired that of his Templars sons who followed.

His hands were what drew the knights' eyes more than any other aspect in this gathering of demigods. One was held to his chest, the fingertips joined to the cross there, frozen in mid-stroke. The other was held out in the direction Dorn stared, palm up and kindly, as if offering aid to one who would rise from the floor.

It was quite the most humble and exquisite rendition of their gene-father Grimaldus had ever laid eyes on. He fought the sudden burning urge to fall to his knees in reverent prayer.

‘This is an omen,’ Bastilan continued. Grimaldus could barely believe only a handful of seconds had passed since the sergeant last spoke.

‘It is,’ the Reclusiarch replied. ‘We will purify this temple under the gaze of our forefather. Dorn watches us, brothers. Let us make him proud of the day he sired the first Templar.’

We move without hesitation, and without caution, through the cathedral.

The angled floor is an irritation that I’ve managed to blank from my mind by the time the third alien is dead. Room by room, we move in unison. The cathedral is divided into a series of chambers ringing the courtyard, each one with its own stained glass windows now shattered and gaping like missing teeth, each room reaching high up with a pointed ceiling ending in the spire above.

The slaughter is easy, almost mindless. Priamus is like a wolf on the leash, eager to run ahead on his own.

My patience is wearing thin with him.

Each chamber also shows its own unique desecration. Tech-adepts and Ecclesiarchy priests lie dead and butchered, their bodies in pieces across the mosaic floors. Unarmed as they were, they offered little resistance to the rampaging invaders. Bookshelves are overturned, ceramic ornaments shattered… I would never put feral destruction past this xenos-breed, but it almost seems as if the greenskins sought something specific in their rabid assault.

‘The articulation structures are sealed. My bones are defended by internal forces. My heart-core is cut off from the parasites.’

Ambush or not, it is disgusting that it took them even this long to achieve such basic necessities.

‘We are retaking the Cathedral of Sanctuary,’ I tell her. ‘Resistance is minimal, Zarha. But you must stand. They are still coming. Bring the cathedral out of range of boarders, or we will be overwhelmed.’

‘I cannot stand,’ she says.

What a sin it is, for such a majestic warrior to speak with such shameful defeat tainting her words. Were she one of my men, I would kill her for such dishonour. Slowly. By strangulation. Cowardice does not deserve the rush of a blade.

‘I have tried,’ she intones.

The emotion colouring her machine-voice brings my bile rising. For all I know, she could be weeping. My disgust is so powerful I must fight the need to vomit.

'Try harder,' I breathe into the vox, and sever the link.

We fight our way to the outer battlements at *Stormherald*'s front, where the incline allows for easy boarding. An ork's fat hand slaps on the red metal of the battlement's edge, and the brute hauls itself up. My pistol meets its face, the heat exchanger vanes hissing against its skin. It has a moment to bawl its hatred at me before I pull the trigger. What remains of the alien falls from its handholds, tumbling to the ground, burning briefly on its way down as a living torch of white-hot fire.

The battlements resemble a true siege in all respects. The last remaining tech-adepts and priests defend the cathedral against boarding aliens, though no more than a small cluster remains. Few humans, augmented or otherwise, are a match for one of these beasts.

Priamus slips the leash of discipline. His charge carries him ahead, his sword flaring with light each time its power field saws into alien flesh. My brothers lay into the enemy along the besieged wall with bolter and blade. The few servitor-manned spire turrets that had been spitting solid shots into the mass of orks fall silent, not willing to risk striking any of us.

'You will do penance for this, Priamus.'

He doesn't answer. 'For the Emperor!' he cries into the vox. 'For Dorn!'

In the pockets of battle where none of us stand, the turrets open fire once again. At least their servitors are worth something, then. The orks turn from butchering the few priests still standing. Their bestial faces are afire with brutish, eager emotion as they come for us.

One of them… Throne of the Emperor… One of them dwarfs its piggish brethren. Its armour makes it twice the size of us, looking like scrap metal and primitive, chugging power generators bolted onto an exoskeletal frame. Its hands are industrial claws that look as if they could peel a tank apart without effort. It even kills his own kin as it strides towards us on the inclined floor. Its claws swing, battering its lesser allies aside, hurling them against the cathedral wall or over the battlement's edge.

I raise my crozius in a two-handed grip.

'That one is mine,' I tell my brothers.

Dorn is watching this.

‘You asked to see me, sir?’

Tomaz didn’t bother to straighten his crumpled work overalls as he stood at what could loosely be called attention. Around him, the command chamber was its usual bustling hive of activity. A junior staff officer bumped him as she passed.

Tomaz said nothing. He’d worked fifteen hours straight today, on a dock backed up with dozens and dozens of ships, with almost no room to unload. Fifteen hours of shouting, of broken vox-casters and no techs spare to fix them, of cargo being dumped wherever it could be dumped – which was inevitably the wrong place (and the most inconvenient one for someone else) – necessitating its removal minutes later when another worker’s already fouled-up work was fouled-up even further.

Frankly, he didn’t much care if he got shoved over onto the ground. Maybe he could curl up and get some damn sleep.

‘Sir,’ he prompted.

Sarren finally looked up from the hololithic table. The colonel had aged in the last week, Maghernus could see it clearly. He looked as tired and bone-achingly sick of it all as Tomaz felt.

‘What?’ Sarren asked, narrowing his bloodshot eyes. ‘Oh. Yes. Dockmaster.’ Sarren looked back down at the hololithic display. ‘I need your crews to speed up. Is that understood?’

Maghernus blinked. ‘I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t quite hear you.’

‘I need,’ Sarren didn’t look up, ‘your crews to speed up their work. The reports I’m getting from the docks show they are at a standstill. We are talking about significant portions of the north and east perimeters of the city, dockmaster. I need to move troops. I need to store materiel. I need you to do your job.’

Maghernus looked around the room in disbelief, unsure how to respond.

‘What would you have me do, colonel? What is there that I can possibly do?’

‘Your *job*, Maghernus.’

‘Have you even seen the docks recently, colonel?’

Sarren looked up again, laughing without even a shred of humour. ‘Do I look like I have seen anything except casualty reports recently?’

‘I can’t do anything about the docks,’ Maghernus shook his head, a sense of unreality settling over him. ‘I’m not a miracle worker.’

‘I appreciate you have an… intense… workload.’

‘That’s not the half of it. We’re dealing with a backlog of weeks, months even, and no room to handle anything.’

‘Nevertheless, I need more from you and your crews.’

‘Of course, sir. I’ll be back in a moment, I feel the sudden need to piss expensive white wine and turn everything I touch into gold.’

‘This is no laughing matter.’

‘And I’m not laughing, you pompous son of a bitch. “Work harder”? “Do more”? Are you insane? There’s nothing I can do!’

Nearby officers glanced his way. Sarren sighed and rubbed his closed eyes with the tips of his fingers.

‘I respect the difficulties of your position, dockmaster, but this is the first week of the siege. This is only going to get worse. We are all going to sleep much less, and we are all going to work much harder.

‘Furthermore, I understand that you are sweating blood in an underappreciated duty, but you are not the only one suffering. You, at least, are guaranteed to live longer than many of us. I have men and women in the streets, fighting and dying for your home, so that you may continue to complain at how I crack the whip over you. I have hundreds of thousands of citizens under arms, facing the greatest alien invasion force the world has ever seen.

‘Sir,’ Maghernus took a breath. ‘I will–’

‘You will shut up and let me finish, dockmaster. I have platoons of men and women lost behind the advancing enemy line, no doubt hacked to pieces by the axes of barbarous xenos monsters. I have armour divisions running out of fuel because of resupply difficulties in the embattled sectors. I have an Emperor-class Titan on its knees, because its commander was too angry to think clearly. I have a city with its edges on fire, and its population in rout with nowhere to run to. I have tens of thousands of soldiers dying to prevent the enemy from reaching the Hel’s Highway – people dying for a *road*, dockmaster – because once the beasts reach the city’s spine, we are all going to die a great deal faster.

‘Now, am I making myself perfectly clear when I tell you that while I have sympathy for your difficulties, I also expect you to work through them? We are, just to be sure, no longer speaking past one another? We are, for the record, now on the same page?’

Maghernus swallowed and nodded.

‘Good,’ Sarren smiled. ‘That’s good. What can you do for me, dockmaster?’

‘I’ll… speak to my crews, colonel.’

‘My thanks for understanding the situation we are in, Tomaz. You are dismissed. Now, someone raise a reliable vox-signal to the Reclusiarch. I need to know how close he is to getting that Titan walking.’

In the cognition chamber, Grimaldus stood before the crippled Zarha.

His armour’s calm, measured hum was marred by a mechanical ticking sound at random intervals. Something, some internal system linking the power pack to the suit of armour was malfunctioning. His skull helm with its silver faceplate was painted with alien blood. His armour’s left knee joint clicked as he moved, the servos inside damaged and in need of reverent maintenance by Chapter artificers. Where scrolls of written oaths had hung from his pauldrons, the armour was burned, the ceramite cracked.

But he was alive.

At his side, Artarion looked similarly battered. The others remained in the cathedral above, maintaining a vigil now the orks were punished and slain for their blasphemy.

‘Your Titan,’ Grimaldus uttered the words, ‘is purged. Now *stand*, princeps.’

Zarha floated in the milky waters, not hearing him, not even moving. She looked as if she had drowned.

‘*Stormherald* has taken her,’ Moderati Carsomir said, his voice low. ‘She was ancient, and had oppressed her will over the Titan’s core for many years.’

‘She still lives,’ the knight noted.

‘Only in the flesh, and not for much longer.’ Carsomir looked pained even explaining this. His eyes were bloodshot and rimmed by dark circles. ‘The machine-spirit of an Imperator is so much stronger than any soul you can imagine, Reclusiarch. These precious engines are born as lesser reflections of the Machine-God Himself. They carry His will and His strength.’

‘No machine-spirit is the equal of a living soul,’ said Grimaldus. ‘She was strong. I sensed it in her.’

‘You understand nothing of the metaphysics at work here! Who are you to

lecture us in this way? We were linked to the Titan's core at the end. You are nothing, an… an *outsider*.'

Grimaldus turned to the crewmembers in their control seats, his broken armour joints snarling.

'I shed blood in the defence of your engine, as did my brothers. You would be torn from your thrones and buried in the rubble of your own failure, had I not saved your lives. The next time you call a Templar *nothing* is the moment I kill you where you sit, little man. You are nothing without your Titan, and your Titan lives because of me. Remember to whom you speak.'

The crew shared uncomfortable glances.

'He meant no offence,' one of the tech-priests mumbled through a facially-implanted vox-caster.

'I do not care what he intended. I deal in realities. Now. Make this Titan walk.'

'We… can't.'

'Do it anyway. *Stormherald* was supposed to move in synergy with the 199th Steel Legion Armoured Division over an hour ago, and they are in full retreat due to being unsupported. The delay is finished with. Get back in the fight.'

'Without a princeps? How are we to do that?' Carsomir shook his head. 'She is gone from us, Reclusiarch. The shame of it all, the rage of defeat. We all felt the Titan rush into her. Her mind has joined the union of all previous princeps, amalgamated in the Titan's core. Her soul is buried as surely as her body would be in a grave.'

'She lives,' the knight narrowed his eyes.

'For now. But this is how princeps die.'

Grimaldus turned back to the amniotic coffin, and the unmoving woman within. 'That is unacceptable.'

'It is the truth.'

'Then the truth,' the Reclusiarch growled, 'is unacceptable.'

She wept in the silence – the way one weeps when truly alone, when there is no shame to be found in being seen by others.

Around her was nothingness absolute. No sound. No movement. No colour. She floated in this nothingness, neither cold nor hot, with no reference of direction or sensation.

And she wept.

Upon opening her eyes moments before, a thrill of fear had sliced up her spine. She did not know who she was, where she was, or why she was here.

Her memories – the fractured, flashing images that were all that kept her mind from being completely hollow – were of a hundred worlds she could not recall seeing, and a hundred wars she could not remember fighting.

Worse, they were each tainted by an emotion she had never felt – something inhuman, abrasive, sinister… and partway between exultation and terror. She saw these moments of memory, and felt the unnerving presence of another being's emotions instead of her own.

It was like drowning. Drowning in someone else's dreams.

Who had she been before? Did it even matter? She slipped deeper. What remaining sense of self existed began to break away and diminish, sacrificed to buy a peaceful, silent death.

Then the voice came, and it ruined everything.

'Zarha,' it said.

With the word came a weak understanding, an awareness. She had memories of her own – at least, she had once possessed such things. It suddenly seemed wrong to no longer have access to her own recollections.

As she resurfaced slowly, the infiltrating memories returned. The wars. The emotions. The fire and the fury. Instinctively, she pulled away again, preparing to return deeper within the nothingness. Anything to escape the memories belonging to another soul.

'Zarha,' the voice clawed after her. 'You swore to me.'

Another layer of comprehension returned. Within the revelation were her own emotions, waiting for her to reclaim them. The overwhelming sensory storm of the other mind's memories no longer frightened her. They angered her.

She would not be so easily shackled. No false-soul's thoughts would conquer her like this.

'You swore to me,' the voice said, 'that you would walk.'

She smiled in the nothingness, rising through it now like an ascending angel. *Stormherald*'s memories assailed her with renewed vigour, but she cast them aside like leaves in the wind.

You are right, Grimaldus, she told the voice. *I did swear I would walk.*

'Stand,' he demanded, stern and cold and glowering. 'Zarha. Stand.'

I will.

The voice came without warning, emerging from the vox-speakers on the coffin.

‘I will.’

Crew members flinched back from the sound, their hands white-knuckled as they clutched the backrests of their thrones. Only Grimaldus remained where he was, face to face with the glass sarcophagus, his blood-smeared skull mask glaring into the milky depths.

The old woman’s body twitched once, and her head rose. She looked around slowly, her augmetic gaze at last coming to rest on the knight before her.

Rubble scattered in an avalanche, and a dust cloud rose again as the wreckage of fallen buildings went tumbling aside. With a thunderous grinding of gears and the clanging-hammering of a multitude of tank-sized pistons in its iron bones, *Stormherald* raised its immense bulk, metre by painful, machine-squealing metre.

The avenue shuddered as its bastion of a right foot pounded onto the road. The sound was loud enough that the nearby buildings still untouched by orkish demolition charges lost their windows in a blizzard of breaking glass.

As the crystal rain fell to the scarred streets below, the Imperator raised its weapons, standing – once more – defiant.

‘Shields up,’ the Crone of Invigilata demanded.

‘Void shields active, my princeps,’ responded Valian Carsomir.

‘Make ready the heart.’

‘Plasma reactor reports all systems at viable integrity, my princeps.’

‘Then we move.’

The chamber shuddered with a familiar rhythm as the god-machine took its first step. Then a second. Then a third. Throughout the metal giant’s bones, hundreds of crew members cheered.

‘We walk.’ The ancient woman turned in her tank, looking at the tall knight once more**. ‘I heard you,’** she told him. **‘As I was dying, I heard you calling me.’**

Grimaldus removed his filthy helm. Although he didn’t look a day over thirty, his eyes told his true age. Like windows into his thoughts, they

showed the weight of his wars.

‘There is a story of my father,’ he said to Zarha.

‘Your father?’

‘Rogal Dorn, the Emperor’s son.’

‘The primarch. I see.’

‘It is a tale of a once-strong brotherhood, broken by Horus the Betrayer. Rogal Dorn and Horus were close before the Great Heresy. None of the Emperor’s sons were bonded as truly in the years before the malignant darkness took hold of Horus and his kin.’

‘I am listening,’ she smiled, knowing how rare this moment was. To hear a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes speak of their gene-sire’s life outside of their Chapter’s secret rituals.

‘It has always been told among the Black Templars that when the two brothers crusaded together, they would compete for the greater glory. Horus was legendarily hungry for triumph, while my father was – it is told – a more reserved and quiet soul. Each time they made war together, they were said to have made an oath in blood. Clasping hands, they would each swear that they would stand until the final day dawned. “Until the end”, they would say.’

‘That is a touching legend.’

‘More than that, princeps. Tradition. It is our most binding oath, spoken only between brothers who know they will never see another war. When a Templar knows he will die, it is the promise he gives to his brothers that he will stand with honour until he can no longer stand at all.’

She said nothing, but she smiled.

‘Yes, I called you back to this war.’ He nodded, his gentle eyes fixed upon her bionic replacements. ‘Because you made a similar oath to me. Promises like that – they matter more than anything else in life. I could not let you die in shame.’

‘Until the end, then.’

‘Until the end, Zarha.’

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PART TWO

KNIGHTFALL

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CHAPTER XIII

THE THIRTY-SIXTH DAY

DARGRAVIAN.
The 5th day. Meritorious defence of the Torshav refuelling complex.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

FARUS.
The 7th day. Discovered in the Kurule Junction surrounded by no fewer than twelve of the slain enemy.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

THALIAR.
The 10th day. Lost in the petrochemical explosions at White Star Point.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

KORITH.
The 10th day. Lost in the petrochemical explosions at White Star Point.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

TORAVAN.
The 10th day. Lost in the petrochemical explosions at White Star Point.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

AMARDES.
The 11th day. Unable to survive 83 per cent body tissue immolation suffered at White Star Point. Granted the Emperor’s Peace.
Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

HALRIK.
The 13th day. Eyewitness reports from Armageddon 101st Steel Legion relate intense personal courage and heroism in the face of overwhelming odds. Awarded posthumous Crusade Mark of Valiant Conduct for rallying Guard forces at the fall of Cargo Bridge Thirty.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

ANGRAD.
The 18th day. Single-handedly destroyed five enemy tanks at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse. Brought down by alien treachery and lost beneath enemy tank treads.
Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

VORENTHAR.
The 18th day. Fought at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

ERIAS.
The 18th day. Fought at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

MARKOSIAN.
The 18th day. Fought at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse. Notably slew an enemy warlord in single combat, atop the alien's command tank. Awarded posthumous Crusade Mark of Unbroken Courage. Body was incinerated by the enemy in wrathful response.
Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

It was always going to happen.

That did not make the reality any easier to bear, or the defeat any less bitter. But preparations were in place. When it happened, the Imperials were ready.

It happened first on the eighteenth day, at the Amalas Concourse, Junction Omega-9b-34. That was its assigned identifier according to the Imperial hololithic displays.

Colonel Sarren was watching through heavy, fatigue-dulled eyes as the flickering holo-images moved silently back from the location of their barricade. It was such a small thing – no more than a few marking runes

blinking back a few centimetres, moving away from the point of the map marked *Amalas Concourse, Junction Omega-9b-34.*

Behind the flickering holo-runes was an illusory ramp, which in turn threaded into a much, much, much wider road. Sarren watched the runes falling back along this ramp, and tried to breathe in. It took four attempts, his breath catching in his throat on the first three.

'This is Colonel Sarren,' he spoke into his hand-vox. 'All units in Omega Sector, Subsector Nine. All units, prepare to retreat. Cancel assigned fallback locations, repeat: cancel withdrawal to assigned fallback locations. When the order comes, you will retreat, retreat, retreat to contingency positions.'

He ignored the storm of demands for confirmation, letting his vox-officers respond on his behalf.

'We did well,' he said to himself. 'We did damn well to keep the bastards away for this long.' Eighteen days – over half a month of siege warfare. He had every reason to colour his bitterness with that fierce core of pride.

The minutes passed in unblinking slowness. An aide came to his side, and quietly asked for his attention.

'Sir, your Baneblade stands ready.'

'Thank you, sergeant.'

She saluted and moved away. Finally, Sarren reached for his vox-mic again.

'All units in Omega Sector, Subsector Nine. Retreat, retreat, retreat. The enemy has reached Hel's Highway.'

MALATHIR.
The 19th day. Missing in action since the successful enemy siege of the Yangara Installation.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

SITHREN.
The 20th day. Fell in personal combat with an enemy Dreadnought at the Danab Junction, Titan rearming site.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

THALHAIDEN.
The 21st day. Fell in personal combat with an enemy Dreadnought at the

Danab Junction, Titan rearming site. Survival depended on extensive and immediate surgical augmentation. Granted the Emperor’s Peace.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

DARMERE.
The 22nd day. Body discovered with massacred elements of the 68th Steel Legion at the Mu-15 barricades.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

IKARION.
The 22nd day. Body discovered with massacred elements of the 68th Steel Legion at the Mu-19 barricades.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

DEMES.
The 30th day. Missing in action since the fall of the Prospering Haven habitation sector. Significant civilian casualties recorded.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

GORTHIS.
The 33rd day. Led a counter-attack after the defences at Bastion IV were overrun. Also lost in the engagement were two Warlord-class Titans of the Legio Invigilata.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

SULAGON.
The 33rd day. Missing in action since the failed defence of Bastion IV. Last sighting reported his honourable conduct in the face of overwhelming enemy numbers.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

NACLIDES.
The 33rd day. Orchestrated and inspired the last stand defence at Bastion IV, seeking to hold the militia fortress until reinforcements could arrive.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

KALEB.
The 33rd day. Part of the counter-attack at Bastion IV. Body suffered

extreme mutilation and dismemberment at the hands of the enemy.
Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

THORIAS.
The 33rd day. Pilot of the Thunderhawk *Avenged* – vehicle destroyed by gargant anti-air fire on routine patrol.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

AVANDAR.
The 33rd day. Co-pilot of the Thunderhawk *Avenged* – vehicle destroyed by gargant anti-air fire on routine patrol.
Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

VANRICH.
The 35th day. Lost in an action to mine the road before an enemy armour division.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

Nerovar lowers his arm, his attention drifting from his narthecium bracer-gauntlet.

Cador lies on the cracked road, the old warrior's armour broken and split.

'Brother,' I tell Nero, 'now is not the time to grieve.'

'Yes, Reclusiarch,' he says, though I know he does not hear me. Not really. With mechanical dullness, his movements are leaden as he lowers his hand to Cador's chest.

Around us, the shattered highway is deserted but for the bodies of our latest hunt. The war here is a distant thing, and though the sound of battle in other sectors reaches our ears, this far behind enemy lines, all is quiet and still. The skies are calm and untroubled – unbroken by wrathful turrets.

The sharp *crack!* of the reductor doing its work splits the silence. First once, then again. The meaty, wet sound of flesh being pulled open follows.

Nero lifts his arm, the surgical gauntlet's armour-piercing flesh drills buzzing, spraying dark, rich Adeptus Astartes blood against his armour. In his hand, with great care, he holds the glistening purplish organs that had rested within Cador's chest and throat. They drip and quiver, as if still trying to feed their host with strength. Nero slides them into a cylinder of preserving fluids, which is in turn retracted into his gauntlet's protective

housing.

I have seen him perform this ritual too many times in the past month.

‘It is done,’ he says, dead-voiced, rising to his feet.

He ignores me as I approach the corpse, occupying himself with entering information on his narthecium’s screen.

CADOR.
The 36th day. Ambush along enemy-controlled portions of Hel’s Highway.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

The thirty-sixth day.

Thirty-six days of gruelling siege. Thirty-six days of retreat, of falling back, of holding positions for as long as we are able until inevitably overwhelmed by the insane, impossible numbers arrayed against us.

The entire city smells of blood. The coppery, stinging scent of human life, and the sickening fungal reek of the foulness purged from orkish veins. Beneath the blood-scent is the stench of burning wood, melted metal, and blasted stone – a city’s death in smells. At the last gathering of commanders in the shadow of Colonel Sarren’s Baneblade, the *Grey Warrior,* it was estimated that the foe controlled forty-six per cent of the city. That was four nights ago.

Almost half of Helsreach, gone. Lost to smoke and flame in bitter, galling defeat.

I am told we lack the force to take anything back. Reinforcements are not coming from the other hives, and the majority of the Guard and militia that still fight are exhausted remnants of the regiments, forever falling back, time and again, road by road. Hold a junction for a few nights, then withdraw to the next position when it finally falls.

Truly, we are fated to die in the most uninspired crusade ever to blight the name of the Black Templars.

‘Reclusiarch,’ the vox calls me.

‘Not now.’ I kneel by Cador’s defiled body, seeing the holes in his armour and flesh – some from alien gunfire, two from the ritual surgery of Nerovar’s flesh-boring tools.

‘Reclusiarch,’ the voice comes again. The rune blinking at the edge of my retinal display signifies it as from the *Grey Warrior.* I suspect I am to be

begged, again, to fall back to Imperial lines and help in the defence of some meaningless roadway junction.

‘I am administering the rites of the fallen to a slain knight. Now is not the time, colonel.’

At first, the colonel had replied to such words with the worthless, polite insistence that he was sorry for my loss. Sarren no longer says such things. The tens of thousands of lives lost in the last four weeks have utterly numbed him to such personal sentiment. That, too, is almost admirable. I see the strength in the way he has changed.

‘Reclusiarch,’ Sarren’s voice betrays how ruined by exhaustion he is. Were I in the room with him, I know I would feel the weariness in his bones like an aura around where he stands. ‘When you return from your scouting run, your presence is required in the Forthright Five district.’

Forthright sector. The southernmost docks.

‘Why?’

‘We are receiving anomalous reports from the Valdez Oil Platforms. The coastal auspex readers are suffering from offshore storms, but there *are* no storms off the coast. We suspect something is happening at sea.’

‘We will be there in an hour,’ I tell him. ‘What anomalies are we speaking of?’

‘If I could give you specifics, Reclusiarch, I would. The auspex readers look to be suffering some kind of directed interference. We believe they’re being jammed.’

‘One hour, colonel.’ Then, ‘Mount up,’ I say to my brothers. It is not a short ride down the Hel’s Highway, especially when it crawls with the enemy. Scouting teams are more often mounted on motorcycles now – the risk of Thunderhawks being shot down in enemy territory is too great.

‘It is strange,’ Nero says, cradling Cador’s helm in his hands, as if the old warrior merely slept. ‘I do not wish to leave him.’

‘That is not Cador.’ I rise from where I have been kneeling next to the body, anointing the tabard with sacred oils, before tearing it from the war-plate. In better times, the tabard would be enshrined on the *Eternal Crusader*. In this time, here and now, I rip it from my brother’s body and tie it around my bracer, carrying it with me as a token to honour him. ‘Cador is gone. You are leaving nothing behind.’

‘You are heartless, brother,’ Nero tells me. Standing here, in this

annihilated city, with the bodies of so many dead aliens around us, I almost burst out laughing. ‘But even for you,’ Nero continues, ‘even for one who wears the Black, that is a cold thing to say.’

‘I loved him as one can love any warrior that fights by your side for two hundred years, boy. The bonds that form from decade upon decade of shared allegiance and united war are not to be ignored. I will miss Cador for the few days that remain to me, before this war kills me, as well. But no, I do not grieve. There is nothing to grieve over when a life has been led in service to the Throne.’

The Apothecary hangs his head. In shame? In thought?

‘I see,’ he says, apropos of nothing.

‘We will speak of this again, Nero. Now mount up, brothers. We ride south.’

Half of the city was a wasteland, one way or the other. Some of it burned, some of it was silent in death now that the xenos had moved on to other sectors, and some of it was simply abandoned. Habitation towers stood under Armageddon’s yellow sky, lifeless and deserted. Manufactories no longer churned out weapons of war, or breathed smoke into the heavens.

Packs of orks – the jackal-like stragglers who had fallen behind the main advance – looted through the empty sectors of the city. While there was little of calculated malice in the beasts’ minds, what few human civilian survivors remained were slain without mercy when they were found.

Five armoured bikes growled their way down Hel’s Highway. Their sloped armour plating was as black as the war-plate worn by each rider. Their engines emitted healthy, throaty roars that told of a thirst for promethium fuel. The boltguns mounted on the motorcycles were linked to belt-feeding ammunition boxes contained within the vehicles’ main bulks.

Priamus throttled back, falling into formation alongside Nerovar. Neither warrior looked at the other as they rode, weaving through a shattered convoy of motionless, burned-out tank hulls spread across the dark rockcrete of the highway.

‘His death,’ the swordsman began, his vox-voice crackling from the distortion of the engines. ‘Does it trouble you?’

‘I do not wish to speak of this, Priamus.’

Priamus banked around the charred skeleton of what had once been a

Chimera trooper carrier. His sword, chained to his back, rattled against his armour with the bike's vibrations.

'He did not die well.'

'I said I have no desire to speak of this, brother. Leave me be.'

'I only say this because if I were as close to him as you were, it would have grieved me, also. He died badly. An ugly, ugly death.'

'He killed several before he fell.'

'He did,' the swordsman allowed, 'but his death-wound was in the back. That would shame me beyond measure.'

'Priamus,' Nerovar's voice was ice cold and heavy with both emotion and threat. 'Leave me alone.'

'You are impossible, Nero.' Priamus revved his engine and accelerated away. 'I try to sympathise with you. I try to connect, and you rebuke me. I will remember this, brother.'

Nerovar said nothing. He just watched the road.

The Jahannam Platform.

Six hundred and nineteen workers stationed on an offshore industrial base. Its skyline was a mess of cranes and storage silos. Beneath it, only the deep of the ocean and the richness of the crude oil that could be refined into promethium.

A new shadow entered the depths.

Like a black wave under the water's surface, it drifted closer to the support struts that held the gigantic platform above the water. Lesser shadows, fish-like and sharp, spilled ahead of the main darkness like rainfall falling from a storm cloud.

The platform shuddered at first, as if shivering in the chill winds that always howled this far from shore.

And then, with majestic slowness, it began to fall. A town-sized, multi-layered platform fell into the ocean, crashing down into the water. The ships around it began, one by one, to explode. Each one, once breached, sank alongside the Jahannam Platform.

Six hundred and nineteen workers, and one thousand and twenty-one crewmembers from the ships died in the freezing waters over the course of the following three hours. The few men and women that managed to reach vox-casters shouted into their machines, little realising their voices were

carrying no further.

The platform was eventually submerged except for a fleet of floating detritus. The ocean no longer teemed with potential profit, but the scrap metal of destroyed enterprise.

Helsreach heard nothing of this.

The Sheol Platform.

In a central spire, nestled between tall, stacked container silos, Technical Officer Nayra Racinov cast an annoyed look at her green screen, and the sudden fuzzy wash of distortion it was displaying for her.

‘You’re joking,’ she said to the screen. It replied with white noise.

She thumped the thick glass with the bottom of her fist. It replied with slightly angrier white noise. Technical Officer Nayra Racinov decided not to try that again.

‘My screen’s just died,’ she called out to the rest of the office. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the ‘rest of the office’, which usually consisted of an overweight ex-crane driver called Gruli who monitored the communications system, had gone for a mug of caffeine.

She looked back at her console. Warning lights were flickering cheerily around the confused screen. One moment, the green wash showed a chaotic burst of incoming presences on the sonar. Hundreds of them. The next, it showed a clear ocean. And the next, nothing but distortion again.

The room shuddered. The entire platform shuddered, as if in the grip of an earthquake.

Nayra swallowed, watching the screen again. The presences under the water, hundreds of them, were back once again.

She dived across the shaking room, hammering the vox-station’s transmit button with the heel of her hand.

She managed to say ‘Helsreach, Helsreach, come in…’ before the world dropped out from under her and the second of the Valdez Oil Platforms was brought down, with its steel bones burning, bending and screaming, into the icy sea.

The Lucifus Platform.

The largest of the three offshore installations was manned by a permanent work crew population twice the size of those at Jahannam and Sheol. While

they were powerless to prevent their own destruction, they at least saw it coming.

Across the platform, sonar auspex readers were suddenly captured by the storm of distortion that had preceded the deaths of Sheol and Jahannam. Here, a fully-staffed control office reacted quicker, with a low-ranking tech-acolyte managing to restore a semblance of clarity to the screens.

Technical Officer Marvek Kolovas was on the vox-network immediately, his gravelly voice carrying directly to the mainland.

‘Helsreach, this is Lucifus.’ Massive, repeat, massive incoming enemy fleet. At least three hundred submersibles. We can’t raise Sheol or Jahannam. Neither platform is responding. Helsreach? Helsreach, come in.’

‘Uh…’

Kolovas blinked at the receiver in his hand. ‘Helsreach?’ he said again.

‘Uh, this is Dock Officer Nylien. You’re under attack?’

‘Throne, are you deaf, you stupid bastard? There’s a fleet of enemy submersibles launching all kinds of hell at our support gantries. We need rescue craft immediately. *Airborne* rescue craft. Lucifus Platform is going down.’

‘I… I…’

‘Helsreach? Helsreach? Do you hear me?’

A new voice broke over the vox-channel. ‘This is Dockmaster Tomaz Maghernus. Helsreach hears and acknowledges.’

Kolovas finally let out the breath he’d been holding. Around him, the world shook as it began to end.

‘Good luck, Lucifus,’ the dockmaster’s voice finished, a moment before the link went dead.

‘This is the situation,’ Colonel Sarren began.

The Forthright Sector dockmaster’s office was, putting it politely, a pit. Maghernus was not a tidy man at the best of times, and a recent divorce wasn’t helping his state of cleanliness. The sizeable room was a hovel of old caffeine mugs that were growing furry mould-masses in their depths, and unfiled stacks of papers were scattered everywhere. Here and there were some of Maghernus’s cast-off clothing from the nights he’d slept in his office rather than go back to his depressing bachelor hab – and before that, back to the woman he’d taken to calling The Cheating Bitch.

The Cheating Bitch was a memory now, and not a pleasant one. He found himself worrying against his will. Had she already died in the war? He wasn't sure his bitterness stretched quite far enough to wish something like that.

His dawdling thoughts were dragged back in line by the arrival of the Reclusiarch. In battered black war-plate, the knight stalked into the room, sending menials and Guard officers scurrying aside.

'I was summoned.' The words blasted rough from his helm's vox-speakers.

'Reclusiarch,' Sarren nodded. The colonel's bone-tiredness bled from him in a slow drip. In his weary majesty, he moved like he was underwater. The officers gathered around the room's messy table, poring over a crinkled paper map of the city and the surrounding coast.

Room was made at the table as Grimaldus approached.

'Speak to me,' he said.

'This is the situation,' Colonel Sarren began again. 'Exactly fifty-four minutes ago, we received a distress call from the Lucifus Platform. They reported they were under attack by an overwhelming submersible fleet numbering at least three hundred enemy vessels.'

The gathered officers and dock leaders variously swore, made notes on the map, or looked to Sarren to provide an answer to this latest development.

'How long until they reach–'

'…must move the reserve garrisons–'

'…storm trooper battalions to assemble–'

Cyria Tyro stood alongside the colonel. 'This is what the bastards were doing in the southern Dead Lands. It's why they touched down there. They were taking their landing ships to pieces and building this fleet.'

'It's worse than that,' Sarren gestured to the portable hololithic table with a control wand, zooming out from the city and showing a much wider spread of the southern coast of the Armageddon Secundus landmass.

'Tempestus Hive,' several officers muttered.

Enemy runes flickered as they drew nearer to the other coastal hive. Almost as many as those bearing down on Helsreach.

'They're dead,' Tyro said. 'Tempestus will fall, no matter what we do. A hive half our size, and with half our defences.'

'We're all dead,' a voice spoke out.

'What did you say?' Commissar Falkov sneered.

‘We have done all that can be done.’ The protests came from an overweight lieutenant in the uniform of the conscripted militia forces. He was calm, sanguine even, speaking with what he hoped was measured wisdom. ‘Throne, three hundred enemy vessels? My men are stationed at the docks, and we know what we can do there. But the defences are as thin as… as… Damn it, there *are* no defences there. We must evacuate the city, surely. We’ve done all we can.’

Commissar Falkov’s dark stormcoat swished as he reached for his sidearm. He never got the chance to execute the lieutenant for cowardice. A snarling, immense blur of blackness sliced across the room. With a crash, the lieutenant was slammed back against the wall, held a metre off the ground, short legs kicking, as the Reclusiarch gripped his throat in one hand.

‘Thirty-six days, you wretched worm. Thirty-six days of defiance, and *thousands upon thousands of heroes lie dead.* You dare speak of retreat when the day finally comes for you to spill the enemy’s blood?’

The lieutenant gagged as he was strangled. Colonel Sarren, Cyria Tyro and the other officers watched in silence. No one turned away.

‘Hnk. Agh. Ss.’ He fought for breath that wouldn’t come as he stared into the silver replica of the God-Emperor’s death mask. Grimaldus leaned closer, his skulled face leering, blocking out all other sight.

‘Where would you run, coward? *Where would you hide that the Emperor would not see your shame and spit on your soul when your worthless life is finally at an end?*’

‘Pl-Please.’

‘Do not shame yourself further by begging for a life you do not deserve.’ Grimaldus tensed his hand, his fingers snapping closed with wet snaps. In his grip, the lieutenant went into spasms, then thumped to the floor as the knight released his grip. The Reclusiarch strode back to the table, ignoring the fallen body.

It took several seconds for conversation to resume. When it did, Falkov saluted the Reclusiarch. Grimaldus ignored it.

Maghernus tried to make sense of the lines being drawn across the map showing troop disposition, but it might as well have been in another language to him. He cleared his throat and said, above the din, ‘Colonel.’

‘Dockmaster.’

‘What does this mean? In the simplest terms, please. All of these lines and

numbers mean nothing to me.’

It was Grimaldus who answered. The knight spoke low, staring down at the map with his helm’s unblinking scarlet eyes.

‘Today is the thirty-sixth day of the siege,’ the Templar said, ‘and unless we defend the docks against the tens of thousands of enemy that will arrive in under two hours, we will lose the city by nightfall.’

Cyria Tyro nodded as she stared at the map. ‘We need to evacuate the dockworkers in the most efficient manner possible, allowing for the arrival of troops.’

‘No,’ Maghernus said, though no one was listening.

‘These avenues,’ Colonel Sarren pointed out, ‘are already clogged by inbound/outbound supply traffic. We will struggle to get all of the dock menials – no offence, Dockmaster – out in time. Let alone get troops in.’

‘No,’ Maghernus said again, louder this time. Still, no one paid him any attention.

One of the Steel Legion majors present, a storm trooper set apart by his dark uniform and shoulder insignia, traced a finger along a central spine road leading from Hel’s Highway.’

‘Evacuate the drones down the other paths and leave the highway route clear. That’ll be enough to fill the central docks with trained bodies.’

‘That still leaves almost two-thirds of the dock districts,’ Sarren frowned, ‘with no defence except the garrisoned militia. And the militia will suffer from the fleeing dock menials being in their way.’

‘Hello?’ said Maghernus.

‘We can reroute the traffic through to these secondary veins,’ Tyro pointed out.

‘Troops would trickle in,’ Sarren nodded. ‘That might not be enough, but it may be the best we can ask for in the situation.’

A sound emerged, machine-like and harsh, like the engine of a Chimera troop transport choking on the wrong fuel. One by one, heads turned to Grimaldus. The sound was emitted from his helm’s vocalisers. He was chuckling.

‘I believe,’ said the knight, ‘the dockmaster has something to say.’

All heads turned to Maghernus.

‘Arm us,’ he said.

Colonel Sarren closed his eyes. The others watched the dockmaster, unsure

if they had heard correctly. Maghernus continued, as the silence spread out, ‘There are over thirty-nine thousand of us on those docks – and that’s just the workers, not including the militia. If you need time, arm us. We’ll give you the time.’

The storm trooper major snorted. ‘You’ll be dead in an hour. All of you.’

‘Maybe,’ said Maghernus. ‘But we were never going to win this war, were we?’

The major wasn’t done, and his voice had less of a sneer now. ‘Brave, but insane. If we allow the enemy to butcher the dockworker forces, the city won’t be able to function for decades after this war. We’re fighting to preserve our way of life, not just survive.’

‘Let us focus,’ Sarren opened his eyes, ‘on surviving first. The fact remains that the majority of the Steel Legion cannot be moved. They are holding the city, and pulling them back from their positions will see the city fall as surely as if we leave the docks undefended. Invigilata and the militia can’t hold everything.’

‘There’s little choice,’ said Tyro. ‘The dockworkers will die unsupported.’

‘Arm them first,’ Grimaldus said, his vox-voice heavy with finality. ‘Then argue how long they have left to live.’

‘Very well. Our course is clear.’ Colonel Sarren cleared his throat. ‘Dockmaster. I thank you.’

‘We’ll fight like… like… We’ll fight damn hard, colonel. Just don’t take too long getting the troops to back us up.’

‘We have immense stockpiles of materiel in the dock districts.’ The colonel nodded to Cyria Tyro. ‘You heard the Reclusiarch. Arm them.’

She saluted with a grim smile, and left the table.

‘We can hold,’ Sarren told everyone that remained. ‘After all we have done, I refuse to believe this will be the treacherous blow that breaks our back. We can hold. Major Krivus, the movement of storm trooper squads to the docks is already under way, but I need you to take personal command of that process immediately. Grav-chute them in if you have to. Drop them from the Valkyries that remain. Every rifle counts.’

The major saluted, and moved out of the office with all the grace and speed his bulky carapace armour allowed.

‘The civilians,’ Tyro murmured, staring at the hololithic. Almost all of the city’s reinforced shelters were situated – and sealed – within and beneath

the docks district. Sixty per cent of the hive's population, crowded in civilian shelter bunkers, now no longer away from the front lines. 'We can't have that many people left in the direct line of fire.'

'No? We can't release them onto the streets.' Sarren shook his head. 'There is nowhere for them to run, and the panic would choke the byways, preventing the Steel Legion ever reaching the docks. They are as safe as they can be in their shelters.'

'The beasts will tear down those shelters,' Tyro argued.

'Yes, they will. Nothing can be done now.' Sarren would not be deterred. 'There will be no evacuation. We can't arm them in time, and we can't protect them if they leave the shelters. They will do nothing but die in the streets and clog the veins of reinforcements.'

Tyro didn't raise another objection. She knew he was right.

Sarren continued, 'I need insurgency walkers and light armour battalions riding in from the tertiary arterial roads here, here, here and here. Sentinels, my friends. Hellhounds and Sentinels. Everything we can muster.' More officers left the table.

'Reclusiarch.'

'Colonel.'

'You know what I am going to ask of you. There is only one way we will survive this assault long enough to flood the docks with tried and tested troops. I cannot order you, but I would ask it nevertheless.'

'There is no need to ask. My knights will deploy from our remaining gunships. We will stand with the civilians. We will hold the docks.'

'My thanks, Reclusiarch. Now, we are as ready as it is possible to be, given the nature of this unwelcome surprise. We are, however, placing a great deal of pressure on Invigilata and the bulk of the Imperial Guard. The city will bleed while we divert our elite infantry to the docks, and this fight… It'll take days. At best.'

'Let Invigilata hold the city,' Grimaldus said, gesturing to the map with a black gauntlet. 'Let the Steel Legion stand with them. Focus on what matters in the here and now.'

'No grand speech? I'm almost disappointed.'

'No speech.' The Templar was already stalking from the room. 'Not for you. You won't be dying this day. I save my words for those who will.'

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CHAPTER XIV

THE DOCKS

They came as the sun began its downward arc in the sky.

The Helsreach docks took up almost a third of the hive's perimeter. Thousands of uninspiring warehouses and harbour office towers stood watch over an expansive bay which featured an endless number of quays and piers that stabbed out into the sloshing, filthy greyish water.

The air across the entire world might have always reeked of something faintly sulphuric, but here – at the heart of Helsreach's industry – the reek bordered on petrochemically unhealthy. It only took an hour for a person's clothes and hair to become saturated with the greasy, heavy stink of spilled oil and ammoniac seawater. Lifers, the dockworkers who spent their entire careers here, hacked up a fair share of blackness when they hawked and spat. Respiratory tumours were the second-largest cause of death among the populace, only behind industrial accidents by a small margin.

The chaos of the docks was a natural deterrent to the enemy assault, but not a true defence. The first sign of the enemy came as crews leaped from their vessels, risking a kilometre-long swim through pollution-foul waters to reach the docks. On dry land, the defenders of Helsreach watched as the hundreds of undocked tankers, lurking offshore with their volatile manifests, began to explode.

The men and women of Helsreach stood together on cargo crates, on the paved groundways, on steel piers, all eyes turned to the seas and the fleet of enemy vessels breaching the surface of the water, powering closer to the city. A horde of humanity, looking out to sea.

Maghernus was close to the front of one crowd, leading his worker gang in

their filthy overalls, clutching a newly-forged lasgun to his chest. They were being handed out by Guard officers from weapon crates stored in warehouses across the dock districts. Every dock gang was treated to a short, simple talk on how a lasrifle was loaded, unloaded, set to safety and fired after aiming. Maghernus had felt his palms sweating as he collected the rifle and extra power cells, which now sat in a small sack hanging from the side of his belt. The hurried Guard sergeant had shouted his way through a quick demonstration, and now here Maghernus was, gun in hand, dry-mouthed.

‘Follow your assigned leaders,’ the sergeant had yelled above the noise of so many men and women gathered in one place. ‘Every dock gang, and every group of fifty people, will have a storm trooper with them. Follow that storm trooper the way you’d follow the Emperor Himself if He descended from the sky and told you what to do with your sorry arses. He will tell you when to fight, when to run, when to hide and when to move. If you do what this trooper tells you to do, you’ve got a much greater chance of getting through this in one piece, and not messing up another unit’s movements. If you don’t listen, there’s a greater chance you’ll be fouling it up for everyone else, and getting your friends killed. Understood?’

General assent answered this.

‘For the next few days, you’re in the Imperial Guard. First rule of the Guard: Go forward. If you get lost, *you go forward.* You lose your way? *You go forward*. You fall away from your group? *You go towards the enemy*. That’s where you’ll do the most good, and that’s where you’ll find your friends. Understood?’

General assent answered this, too. It came with a little more reluctance.

‘Right. Next groups!’

With that, Maghernus’s gang and several others filed from the warehouse, making room for others to get exactly the same lecture.

Outside, dozens of Steel Legion storm troopers in their ochre jackets and heavy, thrumming power generator backpacks were directing the flow of human traffic. Maghernus led his gang to one that waved him over. The man was slender, unshaven, scratching his forehead under the domed helmet he wore. His goggles were raised up, fastened around the helmet, and his rebreather mask was hanging slack around his neck. He had the look of someone who, if not lost, was at least not entirely sure where he

was.

‘Hello,’ Maghernus swallowed. ‘We need an assigned soldier.’

‘Ah, I know this already. That is me. I am Andrej.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

The storm trooper laughed, slapping the dockmaster on the shoulder. ‘That is funny. “Sir”. I may keep you after the war is done, to make me feel good, eh? I am not Sir. I am Andrej. Perhaps I will be Sir after I make sure none of you are dead. I would like that. It would be nice.’

‘I…’

‘Yes, it is a big pressure. I understand this. I would like a promotion, so you must all stay alive. We play for big stakes now, no? I thank you for this idea you have given me. You have made the day more fun.’

‘I…’

‘Come, come. No time for making friends now. We will talk much soon. Hey! All of you dock-working people, come with me, yes?’

Without waiting for an answer, Andrej began to walk through the crowds, followed by Maghernus’s gang. The storm trooper would occasionally wave at other soldiers, most of whom offered silent nods or gruff greetings. One of them, a pale beauty with black hair so thick and rich it had no business being leashed in a plain ponytail, smiled and waved back.

‘Throne, who was that?’ Maghernus asked as he trailed just behind Andrej. ‘Your wife?’

‘Ha! I wish. That is Domoska. We are squadmates. She is nice to look at, no?’

She was. Maghernus watched her leading another group through the masses. As Domoska was lost in the teeming crowds, his gaze fell on the men she was leading. Maghernus prayed he didn’t look as nervous as they all did.

‘It is very funny, I think. Her brother is the ugliest man I have ever seen, yet the sister is touched by fortune with great beauty. He must be very bitter, no?’

Maghernus just nodded.

‘Come, come. Time is running away from us.’

That had been an hour ago. Now, they stood with Andrej, unfamiliar weapons held to their chests, pressed against quickened heartbeats. Andrej was occupying himself by picking his nose. This was something he

struggled to do in gloves of thick, brown leather, but he went about the task with a curiously stately tenacity.

'Sir,' Maghernus started.

'A moment, please. Victory is almost mine.' Andrej flicked something grotesque from his fingertip. 'I can breathe again. Emperor be praised.'

'Sir, shouldn't you say something to us?' He lowered his voice, stepping closer. 'Something to inspire the men?'

Andrej frowned, absently biting his cut lip as he looked around at the other groups spread down the dock lines. 'I do not think so. No other Legionnaire is talking. I was going to wait for the Reclusiarch's speech, you know? Would you prefer me to speak now?'

'The Reclusiarch will speak?'

'Oh, yes. He is good at this. You will like it. It will happen soon, I am thinking.'

A blast of screeching feedback slashed through the air as across the docks – kilometre upon kilometre of them – every vox-tower came alive in a distorted whine.

'See?' Andrej grinned. 'I am always right. It is what I do best.'

For several seconds, the people of Helsreach heard nothing but breathing – low, heavy, threatening – over the vox-speakers.

'Sons and daughters of Hive Helsreach,' the voice boomed across the shore districts, too low and resonant to be human, flavoured by the slight crackle of vox-corruption. *'Look to the water. The water from which you draw the wealth of your city. The water that now promises nothing but death.*

'For thirty-six days, the people of your world, the people of your own city, have been selling their lives to defend you. For thirty-six nights, your own mothers and fathers, your own brothers and sisters, your own sons and daughters have been fighting the enemy to ensure that half of the hive remains in human hands. They have battled, road by road, sweating and fighting and dying so you can enjoy a handful of days of freedom.

'You owe them. You owe them for the sacrifices they have made so far. You owe them for the sacrifices they will make in the days and nights yet to come.

'Here and now, you will have the chance you deserve, the chance to repay them all. More than that, you will have the chance to punish the enemy for

daring to lay siege to your city, for breaking your families apart and destroying your homes.

‘Watch the tides. See the scrap fleet that sails into your port, bearing a horde of howling beasts. When the sun sets at the end of this week, every single invader in those surfacing ships will no longer draw breath from the sacred air of this world. They will fall because of you. You are going to save this city.

‘Fear is natural. It is human. Feel no shame for a heart that beats too fast in this moment, or fingers that tremble as you hold a weapon you have never wielded before. The only shame is in cowardice – in running and leaving others to die when everything comes down to your actions.

‘You are led by Guard veterans – the best of your Steel Legions – Imperial storm troopers. But they are not alone. The forces of Helsreach are coming. Stand and defy the enemy for long enough, and you will soon see thousands of tanks constructed in this very city grinding the invaders into dust. Help. Is. Coming. Until then, stand proud. Stand resolute.

‘Remember these words, brothers and sisters. “When death comes, the good we have done will mean nothing. We are judged in life for the evil we destroy”.

‘That time of judgement is upon you. I know every man and women here feels it in their blood, in their bones.

‘I am Grimaldus of the Black Templars, and this is my vow to you all. While one of us stands, these docks will never fall. If I have to kill a thousand of the enemy myself, the sun will rise once more over an unconquered city.

‘Look for the black knights among you. We will be where the fighting is fiercest, at the heart of the storm.

‘Stand with us, and we will be your salvation.’

Silence descended once more.

Maghernus sighed, tension ebbing from him as his breath misted in the cool air. Andrej was adjusting the slide rack settings on his modified lasrifle. The weapon emitted a pulsing, charged hum that set the dockmaster’s teeth on edge.

‘That was a stern talking-to, no? Not many will run now, I am thinking.’

Maghernus nodded. It took him several moments to speak. ‘What’s that rifle?’

‘This?’ Andrej finished his ministrations, gesturing to the thick power cables feeding from the rifle’s bulky stock to the humming metal power pack he wore between his shoulders. ‘We call them hellguns. Like yours, only brighter and louder and hotter and meaner. And no, you cannot have one. This is mine. They are rare, and only given to people who are right all the time.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘This is a det-pack.’ He tapped the hand-sized detonator disc hanging from his belt. ‘Used for sticking to tanks and making them explode into many pretty pieces. I once had many, now I have only one. When I use it, I will have none, and that will be a sad day.’

Maghernus wanted to ask if Andrej was really a storm trooper. He settled for saying ‘You are not exactly what I expected.’

‘Life,’ the soldier said, looking off to the side in what appeared to be distracted consideration, ‘is a series of very wonderful surprises, until a final bad one.’ Turning to the entire group, Andrej buckled his helmet’s chin strap with a grin.

‘My handsome new friends, it is soon to be time for war. So, my beautiful ladies and fine gentlemen, if you want to remain beautiful and fine, keep your heads down and your rifles up. Always aim from the cheek, with your eyes down the barrel. Do not be firing from the hip – that is the best way to feel excellent about yourself and yet hit nothing. Oh, and it will be loud and scary, no? Much panic, I think. Always wait one second before pulling your trigger, to make sure you are aiming at something you should be aiming at. Otherwise you may be shooting other people, and that is bad news for you, and worse news for them.’

The gangs of workers began to disperse across the docks, taking up positions in alleys between warehouses, behind crate stacks, around the edges of buildings and on the various floors of multi-storey hangars and work blocks facing the sea.

‘Come, come.’ Andrej led his group into the shadows of a loader crane, ordering them to spread out and take cover around the huge metal strut columns and cargo containers close by.

‘Sir?’ called one of the men.

‘My name is Andrej, and I have said this many times. But yes, what is the problem?’

‘My gun’s jammed. I can’t get the power cell back in.’

From where he crouched at the head of the group, Andrej shook his head with a melodramatic sigh. With his goggles over his eyes and the infantile grin plastered across his features, he looked like some breed of gigantic, amused fly.

‘One has to wonder why you would be taking it out in the first place.’

‘I was just–’

‘Yes, yes. Be nice to the weapon’s machine-spirit. Ask it nicely.’

The dockworker looked awkward as he turned his gaze down at the rifle. ‘Please?’ he said, lamely.

‘Ha! Such reverence. Now click that lock switch on the other side. That is the release catch, and you need to slide it back to get the cell back in.’

The man dropped the power cell from his shaking hands, but slapped it home on the second try. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Yes, yes, I am a hero. Now, my brave friends, a siren will soon begin to sing. When it does, it means the enemy is within range of our artillery defences, which are sadly too few in number to make me smile. When I say it is time to be ready, you are all to sit up and start looking for huge and ugly beasts to shoot.’

‘Yes, sir,’ they chorused.

‘I could become used to that, oh yes. Now, listen with both ears my wonderful fellows. Aim for the bodies. It is the biggest target, and that is what counts if you are new to this.’

‘Yes, sir,’ they said again.

‘There is a very beautiful woman I would like to marry after this war. She will almost certainly be saying no to my proposal, but hey, we will see. If she says yes, you are all invited to my wedding, which will be in the eastern territories where the weather is much less like being pissed on by the sky every day. Also, the drinks will be free. You have my word on this. I am always truthful, this being one of my many glorious virtues.’

A few of the men smiled, despite themselves.

The siren began to wail. A banshee’s keen across kilometres of docks, howling over tens of thousands of frightened Imperial souls. Muffled thumps started up in response as the Sabre-class defence platforms opened fire on the incoming fleet.

‘It is time,’ Andrej grinned again, ‘to earn some very shiny medals.’

‘For the Emperor,’ one man breathed the words like a mantra, his eyes closed. ‘For the Emperor.’

‘Oh, no. Not for Him.’ Andrej fastened his rebreather mask, but they could still hear the smile in his voice. ‘He is happy on His Golden Throne, a long way from here. This is for me, and it is for you, and that is more than enough.’

The sirens began to fade, one by one, until a last lone wail sputtered out.

‘Any moment now,’ Andrej said, leaning up to aim over the top of the container he’d been kneeling behind. ‘We will have company.’

The first vessels crashed into the docks with the noise of a storm wave breaking against the shore. With no finesse, without even slowing down, they crunched into the gangways and loading platforms, ferociously beaching themselves. Doors and portals immediately blasted open, disgorging a tide of foul alien flesh onto the docks.

The very first of the alien beasts to spill from its underwater scrap-pod was a brute, easily half again the size of its lesser brethren, bearing a trophy rack on its hunched shoulders with human skulls and Adeptus Astartes helms from other wars on other worlds. It had been leading its tribe across the edges of the Imperium for decades, and in a fight with all else even, would have been more than a match for a lone Adeptus Astartes.

Its face, shoulder and torso disintegrated in a ruthless volley of las-fire that sent the burning remains spinning off the edge of the docks and into the polluted water below. Less than a hundred metres away, Domoska shouted encouragement to the dockworkers she led, and ordered them to fire again. Many had missed, but more than enough had struck home. It was a pattern being repeated along the Helsreach docks now, as the first wave of xenos creatures howled and laughed their way into the city.

From his makeshift cover within the den of loosely-stacked cargo containers, Maghernus fired shot after shot, feeling the rifle in his hands growing warmer with each *crack* of release. He lowered himself below the lip of the crate he knelt behind, and reloaded his lasgun with inexpert fingers. The bastard thing was stuck.

‘Use force,’ Andrej said from his place next to the dockmaster. The storm trooper didn’t look at him, didn’t even glance away from where he was aiming and firing. Another migraine-bright beam of overcharged energy spat from the soldier’s hellgun. ‘The slides often jam on new rifles. This is a

sad truth with the rifles of our home world. Their spirits take time to wake up.’

Maghernus was amazed he could even hear the other man over the din of beaching vessels, alien roars and discharging lasguns filling the air with a scattered chorus of mechanical cracks.

‘I fired a Kantrael rifle once,’ Andrej was continuing, his words punctuated by slight shifts in his posture and aim as he tracked target after target, releasing round after round. ‘It was a very keen weapon, oh yes. That world forges eager guns.’

Maghernus slotted the fresh power cell home and raised himself back into position. His back already ached from his first two minutes as a soldier. How the Steel Legion crouched like this for days on end and got used to battle was a mystery to him. He fired at distant figures, lumbering alien hulks that ran with almost no sense of direction or purpose, as if hunting for a scent – lost until they found it. Others in the emerging packs would race to the source of the las-fire being thrown at them, and were cut down in their headlong run. A few, clearly cunning by the standards of these creatures, remained back and loaded heavy weapons. These last beasts sent shrieking missiles into the entrenched Imperial lines, exploding stacks of cargo crates or pulverising the sides of warehouses.

Slowly but surely, with an insidious creep, the docks were being enveloped by thick smoke from the destroyed submersibles and burning buildings.

‘We will have to move soon,’ Andrej called over his shoulder to the others. The words proved prophetic. With a crash of metal on stone and a wave of flooding water, a submersible beached itself on the docks not thirty metres from their position. Saltwater splashed down on the crouching dockworkers. Alien growls came from the wrecked sub as its doors blasted open.

‘That is far from good,’ the storm trooper scowled behind his rebreather as he slammed back into his firing position, drawing a bead on the first creature to emerge. It dropped like a puppet with its strings cut as the harsh beam lanced through its face and blew out the back of its head.

Maghernus and the others joined their fire to his. Still more beasts came spilling from the submersible. The greenskins were charging now, having sniffed out the nearby cluster of humans behind the barricade, and following the streams of laser fire.

‘Sir…’ one of the men stammered, his eyes wide and bloodshot. ‘Sir, they’re coming…’

‘That is a fact I am aware of,’ Andrej replied, not stopping his stream of fire for a moment.

‘Sir–’

‘Please *shut up* and *keep firing*, yes?’

The beasts reached the cargo containers. They reeked of blood, smoke, bitter sweat and the alien stench of fungal corruption. Bunched muscles hauled the beasts over the barricades, and the brutes roared down at the humans – no longer in cover, but hemmed in by the cargo pods.

Las-rounds sliced up, punching dozens of the scrambling beasts back. The remnants of the first wave were joined by the second, and the creatures dropped in amongst the dockworkers, scrap-pistols barking and heavy axes swinging.

‘Fall back!’ Andrej shouted, firing his hellgun at point-blank range, using it to slash a way through the erupting melee. ‘Run!’

The dockworkers were already in a panicked flight. ‘With me, you idiots!’ the storm trooper yelled, and for a wonder, it actually worked. The dockers with enough presence of mind to clutch their lasguns in the chaos moved with Andrej, adding their fire to his again.

He left a third of his team in the shelter of the containers and crane struts. Screaming dockworkers, unable to escape the invaders. Andrej sensed a momentary hesitation in those that remained with him; a handful of seconds where they ceased against all logic, some freezing rather than open fire on their dying friends, and others mesmerised in astonished fear by the sight of such slaughter.

‘They’re already dead!’ Andrej slammed his gloved palm into the side of Maghernus’s head, jolting him back into the moment. ‘Fire!’

It was enough to break the spell. Las-fire opened up again, streaming into the embattled aliens.

‘Fall back only when you must reload! Stand and fire until then!’

Andrej swore under his breath after he gave the order. The orks were already scrambling closer in an avalanche of green flesh, axe blades and ragged armour. Around the retreating team, the docks burned and thundered with the sounds of more submersibles beaching themselves. Andrej caught a momentary glimpse of another team of dockworkers through the smoke

some distance away, breaking into flight as they were chopped to pieces by the orks in their midst.

The same was about to happen to his ragtag gang, and he swore again. He hoped Domoska was faring better.

What a stupid place to die.

Kilometres away from Helsreach, beneath the sands of the wastelands to the north-west, there was a loud and unprecedented *clunk* of heavy machinery.

Jurisian, Forgemaster of the *Eternal Crusader*, rose to his feet with a slowness born of exhaustion. Tears stood in his eyes – a rarity indeed for a being that had not wept in over twenty decades. His mind pulsed with a thundering ache, a dull and thudding heat that had nothing to do with physical weakness.

He could smell his servitors now that his senses were returning from their focusless lock on his primary task. Turning to regard them where they lay, Jurisian could smell the decay setting into their organic parts. They had been dead for weeks, starved of sustenance. He hadn't noticed. They had proven useless after the first few hours, over a month ago, their internal cognitive processors unable to keep up with the ever-evolving code. Jurisian had needed to work alone, cursing Grimaldus all the while.

Another deep clunk of grinding machinery restored his attention to the present. His joints ached – both the mechanical ones and his still-human ones – from such a period of inactivity. He had been a statue in place for four weeks, his mind alive and his body in hunched, tense stasis by the console.

He had not slept. He knew that on several occasions, as his closing, exhausted mind had drifted close to shutting down, he had almost lost grip on the code. With his thoughts moving sluggishly, the code had outpaced him just as it had done to his servitors. In these moments of panicked intensity, he had resisted by silencing sections of his mind with clinical meditation, operating at a lessened capacity, but at least he was still awake.

Jurisian stared ahead at the vast doors.

- OBERON -

That word burned itself into his core, written in towering letters, more a warning than a tomb marker.

A last resonant machine-sound signalled the grinding rollback of the final interior lock. Pressurised coolant vapour flushed into the corridor as the door’s seal systems vented it. It reeked of chlorine – not poisonous, but stale from being cold-cooked for so many years while the door remained silent and still. In a ballet of rumbling, shuddering technology, the portal began to open.

‘Reclusiarch,’ Jurisian voxed, horrified at the dull scratchiness of his voice. ‘The defences are broken. I am in.’

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CHAPTER XV

BALANCE

The chamber offered nothing at first. Nothing except a powerless darkness that was blacker than black, even to Jurisian's visor lenses. A whispered keyword cycled his vision filters through a thermal-seeking infrared, through to a crude echolocation that falsified an auspex scanner's silent chimes to detect movement. He had made these modifications himself, with the proper respect to the machine-spirit of his wargear.

It was this last sense that produced a response. A vague grey blur passed his vision, and with it, the whirring of internal mechanisms. Hinges. Cogs. Fibre muscles. The sound was as familiar to Jurisian as his own breathing, but brought with it an edge of disconcerting curiosity.

Joints. He was hearing joints.

Something was wrong. The suggestion of static interference at the edges of his vision display told a tale of interference, obfuscation, more than a darkness born from a lack of light. He was being jammed, and the manipulation was insidiously subtle.

Jurisian's bolter came up in steady hands, panning left and right in the darkness as his eye lenses continued to cycle through filters. At last, a targeting monocle slid over his right eye lens – the mechanical echo of a lizard's nictitating membrane.

Better. Not perfect, but better.

'I am Jurisian,' he said to the creature before him, as it resolved into focus. 'Master of the Forge for the *Eternal Crusader,* flagship of the Black Templars.'

The creature didn't answer immediately. The size of a man, it smelled of

ancient machinery and sour breath.

It was likely the thing had once been human – or some part of it was organic, even if only the smallest aspect. Hunched, robed in a ruined cloak of woven fabric, misshapen lumps in its surface area suggested additional limbs or advanced modification. It remained faceless, either refusing to look up or unable to do so.

Jurisian lowered his bolter. The servo-arms extending from his back-mounted power generator still clutched a host of weaponry, aiming it at the robed being before him. He voiced his next words through his helm's vox-speakers, letting his armour's spirit twist the human language into a universal, bluntly simple machine code – a basic program for communication which he had acquired during his long years of tuition and training on Mars, home world of the Mechanicus.

'My identity is Jurisian,' the code pulsed, 'of the Adeptus Astartes.'

The reply came in a burst of snarled code, the words and meanings bleeding into each other. It was akin to machine-slang, evolved from the viral program that sealed the doors. This creature, whatever it was, had an accent born of hundreds of years of isolation here.

'Affirmative,' Jurisian responded in the foundation code. 'I can see you. Your interference should be aborted. It is no longer relevant.'

The creature raised itself higher, no longer lurking on all fours. It now reached Jurisian's chestplate, though it came no closer, remaining a dozen metres away. The weapons in the Forgemaster's servo-arms tracked the being's movements.

It pulsed another tangled mess of accented code.

'Affirmative,' Jurisian replied again. 'I destroyed the sealant program.'

This time, the creature's response was rendered through a more simple code. Jurisian narrowed his eyes at this development. Like the chamber's virus lock, the creature was adapting and working with new information at a faster rate than standard Mechanicus constructs.

'This is the sanctuary of *Oberon*.'

'I know.' The Forgemaster risked a panning glance left and right, seeking any resolution in the artificial darkness. His targeting monocle couldn't pierce the gloom more than a few metres ahead. Flickering static was beginning to crawl across his eye lenses. 'Deactivate the interference,' Jurisian raised his bolter again, 'or I will destroy you.'

Against his will, emotion coloured the code-spoken declaration. To be limited like this was an affront to his sense of honourable conduct – there was no glory or prudence in allowing oneself to be kept at an enemy's mercy.

'I am the guardian of *Oberon*. Your presence generates negligible threat to me.'

Jurisian tasted anger on his tongue, bitter and metallic. His finger tensed on the thick trigger of his bolter.

'Deactivate the interference. This is your final warning.' Static mottled his vision now, like a thousand insects clustering on his eye lenses. He could make out no more than the barest silhouette as the Mechanicus warden moved closer.

'Negative,' it said.

Jurisian's servo-arms, answering his mind's impulses a fraction of a second after his true limbs, had raised his axe and other weapons in a threatening display, almost akin to some feral world arachnid predator increasing its size to warn off prey.

The knight's final threat was spoken with conviction, the machine-cant laced with numerical equations indicating emphasis.

'Then die.'

Their saviour was one of the black knights.

He charged the enemy from the sky with a whining howl of protesting thrusters. Fire streaked from his flight pack as he landed in the aliens' midst, a dark blur of movement outlined in flame.

Andrej immediately scrambled back, ordering his gang into the relative cover provided by an overturned cargo loader truck.

'Do not dare cease fire,' he shouted over the sound of alien bellowing and thousands of guns crying out. He doubted any of them heard him, but they went back to firing as soon as they slid into cover.

The Templar cut left and right with his chainsword, ripping stinking green flesh from malformed orkish bones. His bolt pistol sang out in a thudding refrain, embedding fist-sized bolts in alien bodies which detonated a moment later. Andrej, who had seen Adeptus Astartes fight before, did all he could to keep up his rate of fire in support of the suicidal bravery taking place. Several of his dockworker crew lowered their guns in slack-jawed,

frightened awe.

Perhaps, Andrej cursed, they believed the Adeptus Astartes would actually survive unaided.

‘Keep firing, damn you!’ the storm trooper yelled. ‘He’s dying for us!’

The ferocious advantage of surprise did not last long. The greenskins turned to the deadly threat among them, laying about with their crude axes and firing their clattering pistols at close range. Several of them hit each other in their fury, while stragglers and those on the edges of the melee were punched down by las-fire from Andrej’s gang.

The Templar screamed – a vox-distorted cry of wrath that went crawling across the skin of every human in earshot. His chainblade fell from his black hand, hanging loose on the thick chain that bound the blade to his forearm.

Behind the staggering warrior, one of the few remaining greenskins tore a crude spear back out from the knight’s lower spine. The beast had no more than a moment to enjoy its victory: a searing lance of headache-bright energy dissolved its face and blew the contents of its skull over the dying knight’s armour. Andrej recharged his weapon without even needing to look away from the melee.

The Templar regained his balance, then recovered his grip on the revving chainsword a heartbeat after. He lasted for three more savage cuts, tearing gobbets of flesh and shattered armour from the orks closest to him, before the remnants of the alien pack impaled him on their spears and bore him to the ground. His flight pack crashed to the floor, rent from his body. They aimed with brutal efficiency, ramming blades into his armour joints and using their immense strength to force him to his knees. The Templar’s pistol came up one final time to hammer a bolt into the chest of the nearest beast, spraying those nearby with inhuman gore as it primed and exploded.

The last three orks were scythed down by Andrej’s dock team, collapsing next to the Adeptus Astartes they had slain. The scene before them was a slice of eerie calm, the heart of a storm, while the rest of the docks burned.

‘Throne,’ the storm trooper hissed. ‘Stay here, yes?’

Maghernus didn’t even have time to agree before the soldier was making a break across the rockcrete platform, crouched low, moving to the downed knight’s body.

‘What’s he doing?’ asked one of the dockworkers.

Maghernus wanted to know that himself. He moved after the storm trooper, doing his best to mimic the crouching run Andrej had just performed. Something hot and angry buzzed past his ear, like the passage of a poisonous insect. It took several seconds to realise he'd almost had his head taken off by a stray shot.

'What are you doing?' He knelt by the storm trooper.

What he was doing seemed obvious to Andrej. His gloved fingers quested under the chin of the knight's helm, seeking some kind of catch, or lock, or release. Throne, there must be something…

'Seeing if he lives,' the soldier muttered, clearly distracted. 'Ayah! Got you.'

With a muted hiss almost drowned out by nearby gunfire, the helm's seals parted and the expressionless helmet came loose. Andrej pulled it off, handing it to Maghernus. It was about three times as heavy as the dockmaster had been expecting, and he'd been expecting it to weigh a hell of a lot.

The knight wasn't dead. His face was awash in blood, the dark fluid filming over his eyes and darkening his features as it ran from his nose and clenched teeth. Adeptus Astartes blood was supposed to clot within instants, so the tales told. It wasn't happening here, and Andrej doubted that was a positive sign.

'Can't move,' the Templar growled. His voice was wet from a burbling throat. 'Spine. Hearts. Dying.'

'There is something inside you, I know,' Andrej spared a glance around, making sure they weren't in immediate danger. 'Something important inside you, that your brothers must reclaim, yes?'

'Progenoid,' the knight's breathing was as raw as a chainsword's snarl. The warrior's oversized armoured hand gripped the front of Andrej's armour. It was strengthless.

'I do not know what that is, sir knight.'

'Gene-seed,' the Templar spat blood as he forced the words through numbing lips. His eyes were lolling now, half closed and rolling back. It was clear he was blind. *'Legacy.'*

Andrej nodded to Maghernus. 'Help me move him. Do not argue. It is important that his brothers find his body. Important for their rituals.'

'Emperor…' the knight grunted, *'Emperor protects.'*

With those words, the hand gripping Andrej’s chestguard went slack, thumping to rest on the heraldic cross on the warrior’s own breastplate.

Their eyes met once, and the dockworker and the career soldier started dragging the dead knight.

We are dying.

We are dying, scattered across kilometres of docks, mixed in with the humans, torn from the unity of brotherhood.

‘Wear your helm,’ I say to Nero without looking over my shoulder at him. ‘Do not let the humans see you like this.’

With tears in his eyes, our healer does as I order. The list of failing life signs is transferred from his wrist display to his retinal readouts. I hear him draw a shaking breath over the vox.

‘Anastus is dead,’ he says, adding another name to those that came before.

I lean forward, the racing wind clawing over the surface of my armour, sending my parchment scrolls and tabard streaming in its grip. We are several hundred metres up, making ready to drop on the beasts below. The Thunderhawk’s turbines lower their growl as they throttle down.

The docks below us are already in ruin. They burn – black and grey, amber and orange – making the view from the polluted skies like staring down into the mouth of some mythical dragon. Percussive thumps signal the crash landings of more submersibles, or our own munitions stores going up in flames.

‘Helsreach will fall tonight,’ Bastilan says, giving voice to something we must all be thinking. I have never, in over a century of waging war at his side, heard him speak such a thing.

‘And do not lie to me, Grimaldus,’ he says, sharing the bulkhead’s space with me. ‘Save your words for the others, brother.’

I tolerate such familiarity from him.

But he is wrong.

‘Not tonight,’ I tell him, and he doesn’t look away from the skull I wear as my face. ‘I swore to the humans that the sun would rise over an unconquered city. I do not mean to break that vow. And you, brother, will help me keep it.’

Bastilan turns away at last. What closeness had been near to the surface cools fast, leaving us distant again. ‘As you command,’ he says.

‘Make ready to jump,’ I vox to the others. ‘Nero. Do you stand ready?’

‘What?’ He lowers his narthecium, retracting surgical saws and cutting blades. I see the empty sockets for gene-seed storage withdraw and lock under smooth armour plating.

‘I need you, Nero. Our brothers need you.’

‘Do not lecture me, Reclusiarch. I stand ready.’

The others, Priamus especially, are taking note now. ‘Cador is dead. Two-thirds of the Helsreach Crusade will not live to see the coming dawn. You will carry their legacy, my brother. Grief has its place – none of us have suffered such losses before – but if you are lost in sorrow then you will be the death of us all.’

‘I said I stand ready! Why do you single me out like this? Priamus is likely to see us all dead because he cannot follow orders! Bastilan and Artarion are not half the fighters Cador was. Yet you lecture *me* about being the weak one, the crack in the blade?’

My pistol is aimed at his head, at the faceplate marked white as a symbol of his expertise and valuable skills.

‘Bitterness is taking root within you, brother. Much longer, and it will bore through you, hollowing out your heart and soul, leaving naught but empty bones. When I tell you to focus and stand with your brothers, you respond with black words and treacherous thoughts. So I tell you again, one last time, that we need you. And you need us.’

He doesn’t stare me down. When he looks away, it’s not in defeat or cowardice, but in shame.

‘Yes, Reclusiarch. My brothers, forgive me. My humours are unbalanced, and my mind has been adrift.’

‘“A mind without purpose will walk in dark places,”’ Artarion quotes. A human philosopher; one I don’t recognise.

‘It is fine, Nero,’ Bastilan grunts. ‘Cador was one of the Chapter’s finest. I miss him, just as you do.’

‘I forgive you, Nerovar,’ Priamus says, and I thank him on a private vox-channel for not sounding like he is sneering for once.

The Thunderhawk slows, thrusters keeping it aloft as we make ready to jump. In the air around us, snapping explosions decorate the sky.

‘Anti-air fire? Already?’ Artarion asks.

Whether they’ve beached several submersibles with surface-to-air

weapons or taken control of wall defence cannons is irrelevant. The gunship swings violently, shaking as the armour plating takes its first hit. They're firing up through the smoke, tracking the gunship through primitive methods that are apparently effective enough to work.

'Incoming missiles,' the pilot voxes to us. The Thunderhawk re-engages its forward thrust, boosting forward. 'Dozens, too close to evade. Jump now or die with me.'

Priamus goes. Artarion follows. Nero and Bastilan next, launching out of the airlock.

The pilot, Troven, is not a warrior I know well. I cannot judge his temperament the way I can with my closest brothers, except to say that he is a Templar, with all the courage, pride and resolution that honour entails.

In a human, I'd call such behaviour stubbornness.

'There is no need to die here,' I say as I enter the cockpit. I have no idea if I'm right to say such a thing, but if this hope can be forged into the truth, I will make it happen now.

'Reclusiarch?'

Troven has chosen to wrench the Thunderhawk through evasive manoeuvres, rather than disengage himself from the pilot's throne and try to leap from the gunship. Both choices, such as they are, are likely to fail. I still believe he chose wrong.

'Disengage *now*.' I haul him from the throne, power feeds snapping from connection ports in his armour. He spasms with the electrical feedback of an unsafe and flawed disconnect, half of his perception and consciousness still melded with the gunship's machine-spirit. His protests are reduced to garbled, wordless grunts of pain as his armour's power supply kicks back in and the union with the gunship's systems dims.

The Thunderhawk tilts, diving from the sky on dead engines. Nausea fades as soon as it threatens, balanced by the gene-forged organs replacing my standard human eyes and ears. Troven's genetic compensators take a moment longer to adjust, ruined by the disorientation of the severed connection. I hear him grunting through his helm's vox-speakers, swallowing his bile.

This freefall will delay the missiles' impact. I hope.

In this weakened state, he's easy to drag from the cockpit to the open bulkhead. The visible sky is twisting as the gunship plummets. Mag-locked

step by mag-locked step, my boots adhere to the iron floor, preventing the spiralling death-dive from hurling us around the cabin.

As I face the air-rushing portal, my targeting display overlays the spinning sky. I blink at a flashing rune of crossed blades pulsing in the centre. A propulsion gauge spills across my retinas, and the jump pack weighing my shoulders down whines into life.

'You'll kill us both,' Troven almost laughs. I spare no more than a second's thought for the two servitors operating the other flight stations.

'*Brace,*' is all I have time to say. The world around us dissolves into jagged metal and screaming fire.

Once the noises had faded and the air reeked of the powdery, familiar scent of bolter fire, Jurisian hauled himself back to his feet.

The immediate area around him was illuminated by flashing sparks and energy flares vented by his broken servo arm and savaged armour. The expulsions of electrical force from wounded metal were bright enough to leave violent smears across his sensitive eye lenses. Jurisian blanked the filters with a command word, restoring standard vision mode.

A moan of pain emerged from his vox-speakers as a harsh crackle. Even with no one nearby, it shamed him to voice his weakness in such a way. He would seek out the Reclusiarch and perform penance when… Well, there would be no *when.* This war would never be won.

Retinal displays showed in grim detail the damage to his internal biological and mechanical components. The Forgemaster spared several seconds to examine the flashing warning runes, indicating leaking vital oxygenated haemo-plasma from areas near several organs. Jurisian felt a grin steal over his face as his pain-drunk mind latched on to an altogether more human explanation.

I'm bleeding.

He barely cared. It wasn't terminal damage, neither to his living components nor his augmetic modifications. He stepped forward, crushing underfoot one of the many segmented blade-arms the warden had deployed as it launched at him only minutes before.

It lay in motionless repose, its internal power generators cycling down, descending into silence. In death, the truth was revealed with an almost melancholic clarity. The warden was no more than a shadow of what it had

claimed to be.

Certainly, the creature would have been a match for most intruders – be they alien or human. But with its robe parted to show the decrepit truth it had concealed, what was once a stalwart Mechanicus tech-guardian was revealed as little more than an ancient, degrading magos, long-starved of the supplies it needed to maintain itself. Once, it had been human. And in an era after that, it had been a powerful sentinel for the Mechanicus, watching over this most precious of secrets.

Time had robbed it of a great deal.

The ancient warden had leapt at Jurisian, its limb-blades snapping into life, stabbing and cutting as they descended on flailing mechadendrites.

The knight's own servo-arms had hit back, slower, weightier, inflicting pounding and lasting damage in opposition to the scrapes and gouges inflicted by the warden. By the time the sentinel creature had severed one of the knight's machine-limbs, Jurisian's bolter was hammering shot after shot into the guardian's torso, detonating vital systems and rupturing the human organs that yet remained. Suspension fluid and chemical lubricants ran in place of blood that would no longer flow.

Piercing pain signalled the moments that the warden punctured Jurisian's ceramite armour. It still possessed enough of its attack routines to stab for his joints and armour's weak points, but just as often as it struck a gouging hit, its efforts were deflected by the customised, revered war-plate that Jurisian had modified himself so long ago on the surface of Mars.

He rose after it had finally fallen. Damaged, but unashamed. Regretful, but with his conviction burning.

Already, the creature – the sentinel that had come so close to ending his life – was forgotten. The interference had cleared with its destruction.

Jurisian stared into the resolving darkness of the colossal chamber, and became the first living being in over five hundred years to see *Oberon*, the Ordinatus Armageddon.

'Grimaldus,' he whispered into the vox. 'It's true. It's the holy lance of the Machine-God.'

The thrusters kicked in with desperate force, arresting their insane descent. The jolt was savage – without his armour's fibre bundle musculature, Grimaldus's neck would have snapped as soon as the boosters fired to bring

them both stable.

They were still falling too fast, even with the jump pack's engines howling hot.

'Acknowledged, Jurisian,' the Reclusiarch breathed. *Of all the accursed times…*

Grimaldus grunted at the weight of Troven's armour. His pistol dangled on its wrist-bound chain, while he gripped the other knight's vambrace. Troven, in turn, hung in the air, holding to Grimaldus's own wrist. Their burning tabards slapped against their armour, caught in the wind.

With retinal gauges flashing scarlet, the Reclusiarch and the prone knight descended into the atmosphere of black smoke rising from the docks. Before their vision was blocked entirely, Grimaldus saw Troven reaching with his free hand, drawing the gladius sheathed to his thigh.

Interference crackled thick from the surrounding chaos, but Bastilan's vox-voice made it through the distortion, coloured by brutal eagerness.

'We saw that, Reclusiarch. Dorn's blood, we all saw it.'

'Then you are unfocused on the battle, and will do penance for it'.

He bunched his muscles, negating thrust in the moment before thudding into the ground with bone-shaking force. The two knights skidded across the rockcrete surface of the docks, sparks spraying from their armour.

As they both regained their footing, the hulking silhouettes of alien beasts ambled through the surrounding smoke.

'For Dorn and the Emperor!' Troven cried, and brought his bolter to bear from where it hung at his side, forever bound to his armour by the ritual chains. Grimaldus twinned his cries with Troven's, laying into the enemy.

If these docks could be saved, then by the Throne, they would be.

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CHAPTER XVI

A TURNING TIDE

A wing of fighters bolted overhead, their engines leaving smoke-smears across the darkening sky. In pursuit, alien craft rattled after them, tracer rounds spitting across the clouds in futility as they tried to hunt the Imperial fighters back to one of the city's few remaining airstrips.

Beneath the aerial chase, Helsreach burned. Avenue by avenue, alley by alley, the invaders flooded through the docks district, gaining ground with the death of every defender.

Where the fighting was fiercest, vox-contact was a broken, unreliable mess of lucky signals breaking through the interference. The Imperials fell back through the night, sector by sector, leaving thoroughfares packed with their dead. The city added new scents to its reek of sulphur and saltwater. Now, Helsreach had come to smell of blood and flame, of a hundred thousand lives ending in fire between a single sunrise and sunset. Poets from the impious ages of Old Terra had written of a punitive afterlife, a hell beneath the world's surface. Had that realm ever existed, it would have smelled like this industrial city, dying in fire on the shores of Armageddon Secundus.

In unconnected catacombs below the ground, the citizens of Helsreach remained shielded from the slaughter above. They clustered together in the darkness, listening to the erratic drumbeat of factories, workshops, tanks and munitions stores exploding. Although the walls of the subterranean shelters shook with tremors that bled down through the ground, the booms and thumps on the surface echoed down like peals of thunder. Many parents told their young children that it was just a violent storm above.

Across the embattled world, the besieged cities were visible from orbit as

blackened patches scarring the planet's surface. As the planetary assault entered its second month, Armageddon's atmosphere was turning thick and sour with smoke from the burning hives.

Helsreach itself no longer resembled a city. With the docks under siege, the last pristine sectors of the hive were aflame, wreathing the city in a black pall born of burning oil refineries.

The hive's spine, Hel's Highway, was a wounded serpent winding through the city. Its skin was mottled with patches of light and dark: pale and grey where the fighting had ceased, leaving graveyards of silent tanks, and blackened where conflict still raged, pitting the armoured fist of the Steel Legion against the junk-tanks of the invading beasts.

The city walls were half fallen, resembling some archaeological ruin. Half of the hive was surrendered, abandoned to defeat's lifeless silence. The other half, held by Imperial forces that diminished by the hour, burned in battle.

And so dawned the thirty-seventh day.

'Hey, no sleep for you.'

Andrej kicked at Maghernus's shin, jolting the dockmaster back to the waking world. 'We must move soon, I am thinking. No time for sleeping.'

Tomaz blinked the stickiness of exhaustion from his eyes. He'd not even realised he'd fallen asleep. The two of them were crouched behind a stack of crates in a warehouse with the remaining nine men of Maghernus's dock gang. He met their faces now, each in turn, barely recognising any of them. A day of war had aged them all, gifting them with sunken eyes and soot-blackened skin that brought out the lines in their middle-aged faces.

'Where are we going?' Maghernus whispered back. The storm trooper had removed his goggles to wipe his own aching eyes. They'd not slept – they'd barely even stopped fighting – in over twenty hours.

'My captain wishes us to move west. There are civilian shelters above ground there.'

One of the men hawked and spat on the ground. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. Andrej didn't think any less of him for the fact he'd been weeping.

'West?' the man asked.

'West,' Andrej said again. 'That is my captain's order, and that is what we

will do.’

‘But the beasts are already there. We saw them.’

‘I did not say the order was what I wished to do with my retirement years. I said it was an order, and obeying orders is what we are going to do.’

‘But if the aliens are already there…’ another worker piped up, snapping Andrej’s patience.

‘Then we will be behind enemy lines and see many dead civilians we were too late to save. Throne, you think I have good answers for you all? I do not. I have no good answers, not for you, not for anyone else. But my captain has ordered us to go there, and go there we most certainly shall. Yes? Yes.’

It did the trick. A ghost of focus returned to their slack, weary gazes.

‘Let’s do it, then,’ Maghernus said, his knees clicking as he rose up. He was amazed he could still stand. ‘Blood of the Emperor, I’ve never ached like this.’

‘Why are you complaining, I wonder,’ the storm trooper refastened his goggles with a grin. ‘You worked insane shifts on these docks. This is surely no more tiring, I think.’

‘Yeah,’ one of the others grunted, ‘but we were getting paid then.’

With muted laughter, the team moved back out onto the docks.

Colonel Sarren’s injured arm was securely fastened in a makeshift sling. What annoyed him most was the loss of his right arm to gesture with to the hololithic display, but then, that was the price to pay for foolishly leaving the *Grey Warrior* in hostile territory. Shrapnel in the arm was a lucky break, all things considered. The enemy sniper team had killed four of his Baneblade’s command crew as they surfaced from the bowels of their tank for much-needed fresh air after countless hours breathing the rank, recycled fumes of the internal filtration scrubbers.

Another sector cleared, only to be wormed through again by bestial scavengers mere hours later.

In the low-ceilinged confines of the tank’s principal command chamber, Sarren sat on his well-worn throne, letting the tension ebb from him and trying to forget the column of pain that had been a perfectly normal arm only an hour before. The sawbones, Jerth, had already recommended amputation, citing the risk of infection from dirty shrapnel and the

likelihood the limb would never return to – as he put it – ‘full functionality’.

Bloody surgeons. Always so keen to graft on some cheap, jury-rigged bionic that would click every time he moved a muscle and seize up because of low-grade components. Sarren was no stranger to augmetics in the Guard, and they were a far cry from the modifications afforded to the rich and decadent.

He stared at the hololithic table now, watching the docks recede from Imperial control with agonising, desperate slowness. Seeing the flickering regiment runes and location sigils, it was hard to translate the skeletal vision to the fierce fighting that was truly taking place.

More and more Steel Legion infantry units were reaching the docks, but it was like holding the sea back with a bucket. The Guardsmen being sent in did little but bolster the general retreat. Reclaiming ground was a distant fiction.

‘Sir?’ the vox-officer called out. Sarren looked over to him, drawn from his reverie, not realising the man had been trying to get his attention for almost a minute.

‘Yes?’

‘Word from orbit. The Imperial fleet is reengaging again.’

Sarren made the sign of the aquila – at least, he tried to, and ended with a grunt of pain as his bound arm flared up in pained protest. One-handed, he made a single wing of the Imperial eagle instead.

‘Acknowledged. May the Emperor be with them all.’

This scarce acknowledgement made, he lapsed back into watching the deployment of his forces throughout the city. Around him, the tank’s crew worked at their stations.

So the Imperial fleet was reengaging.

Again.

Every few days, the same story played out. The joint Adeptus Astartes and Naval fleet would break from the warp close to the planet, and hurl themselves at the ork vessels ringing the embattled world. The engagement would hold for several hours as both sides inflicted horrendous losses on the other, but the Imperials would inevitably be hurled back into a fighting retreat by the immense opposition.

Once they’d fallen back to the safety of a nearby system, they’d regroup over time, under the command of Admiral Parol and High Marshal Hel-

brecht, and make ready for another assault. It was blunt, and crudely effective. In a void war of such magnitude, there was little place for finesse. Sarren wasn't blind to the tactics at play – lance strikes into the heart of the enemy fleet, bleed them for all that was possible before a retreat back to safety. It was a necessary grind, a war of attrition.

It was also hardly inspiring. The hive cities were on the edge now. Without reinforcements in the coming weeks, many would fall outright. The infrequent transmissions from Tartarus, Infernus and Acheron were all increasingly grim, as were Sarren's reports of Helsreach to them.

If there was no–

'Sir?'

Sarren glanced to his left, to where the vox-officer sat at his station. The man held his headphone receivers to his ear with one hand. He looked pale.

'Emergency signal from the *Serpentine* in orbit. She requests immediate cessation of all anti-air weaponry in the docks district.'

Sarren sat forward in his chair. There was barely any anti-air firepower left in the docks district, but that wasn't the point.

'What did you say?'

'The *Serpentine,* Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser, sir. She requests–'

'Throne, send the order. Send the order! Deactivate all remaining anti-air turrets in the docks district!'

Around him, the tank's crew was silent. Waiting, watching.

Sarren breathed a single word, almost fearful giving voice to it would shatter the possibility it was true.

'Reinforcements…'

One ship.

The *Serpentine*.

Sea green and charcoal black, it dived like a dragon of myth through the enemy fleet while the rest of the Imperial warships hammered into the orkish invaders, breaking against the ring of alien cruisers surrounding the planet.

One ship broke through, running a gauntlet of enemy fire, its shields crackling into lifelessness and its hull aflame. The *Serpentine* hadn't come to fight. As the Adeptus Astartes vessel tore through the upper atmosphere, drop pods and Thunderhawks rained from its ironclad belly, streaming

down to the world below.

Its duty complete, the *Serpentine* powered its way back into the fight. Its captain gritted his teeth against a screed of damage reports signalling the death of his beloved ship, but there was no shame in dying with such a vital duty done. He had acted under the orders of the highest authority – a warrior on the surface below whose deeds were already inscribed in a hundred annals of Imperial glory. That warrior had demanded this risk be taken, and that reinforcements be hurled down to Armageddon no matter the odds facing them.

His name was Tu'Shan, Lord of the Fire-born, and the *Serpentine* did his will.

The *Serpentine*'s end never came. A black shape eclipsed the fat-hulled orkish destroyers cutting the Adeptus Astartes vessel to pieces. Another ship, a far greater ship, pounded the alien attackers into wreckage with overwhelming broadside fire, buying the *Serpentine* the precious moments it needed to escape the gauntlet it had run a second time.

As they broke clear, the *Serpentine*'s captain breathed out a prayer, and signalled across the bridge to the master of communications.

'Send word to the *Eternal Crusader,'* he said. 'Give them the sincerest thanks of our Chapter.'

The response from the *Eternal Crusader* came back almost immediately. The grim voice of High Marshal Helbrecht echoed across the *Serpentine*'s bridge.

'It is the Black Templars that thank you, Salamander.'

The beasts have cracked open another of the above-ground civilian shelters.

Like blood spilling from a wound, humans flood into the streets through the destroyed wall. When the choices are to die cowering, or die fleeing to a safety that may not even exist, any human can be forgiven for giving in to panic. I tell myself this as I watch them dying, and do all I can not to judge them, to hold them to the exalted standards of honour I would demand of my brothers. They're just human. My disgust is unfair, unwarranted. And yet it remains.

As they die, families and souls of all ages, they squeal like butchered swine.

This war is poisonous. Trapped here, locked away from my Chapter, my

mind echoes with bleak prejudices. It is becoming hard to accept that I must die for these people to live.

'Attack,' I tell my brothers, my voice barely carrying over the ranting of the engine. Together, we run from the moving Rhino transport, smashing into the enemy's rearguard.

My crozius rises and falls, as it has risen and fallen ten thousand times in the last month. The adamantium eagle chimes as it cuts through the air. It flares with unleashed energy as its power field connects with flesh and armour. The brazier orb built into the weapon's pommel breathes sacred incense in a grey mist, like coils of smoke weaving between us all – friend and foe.

The weariness ebbs. The grudges fade. Hatred is the greatest purifier, the truest emotion overriding all others. Blood, stinking and inhuman, rains across my armour in discoloured spurts. As it marks the black cross I wear on my chest, my revulsion flares anew.

Crunch. The crozius maul ends another alien's life. *Crunch.* Another. My mentor, the great Mordred the Black, wielded this weapon in battle against mankind's foes for almost four centuries. It sickens me to know it may never be recovered from Helsreach. Nor our armour. Nor our gene-seed. What legacy will we leave once the last of us falls to the filthy blades of these beasts?

One of them roars into my face, spattering my visor with its unclean saliva. Less than a second later, my crozius annihilates its features, silencing whatever pathetic alien challenge I was supposed to be answering.

My secondary heart has joined the primary. I feel them thudding in concert, but not in unison. My human heart pounds like a tribal drum, fast and hot. Twinned to it in my chest, my gene-grown heart supports it in a slow, heavy thud.

They swarm over each other in their mindless fervour to claw at us. Fistfuls of scrap metal that have no right to function as weapons cough solid rounds that clang off our armour. Each shot tears more of the black paint from our war-plate but sheds none of Dorn's holy blood.

At last, they recognise the threat we represent. The aliens abandon their wanton slaughter of the fleeing civilians that still spill from the shell-broken wall. The mob of beasts, flooding the street, has turned to more tempting prey. Us.

Our banner falls.

Artarion's cry of pain carries across the close-range vox as a roar of distortion, but I hear his voice beneath the interference.

Priamus is with him before the rest of us can react. Throne, he can fight. His blade lunges and cuts, every gesture a killing blow.

'Get up,' he snarls at Artarion without even looking.

I crash the faceplate of my helm into the barking maw of the alien before me, shattering its jaw and the rows of shark-like teeth. As it falls back, my crozius crunches into its throat, hammering its wrecked corpse to the ground.

The banner rises again, though Artarion favours his left leg. The right is mauled, his thigh punctured by an alien spear. Curse the fact these beasts have the strength to violate Adeptus Astartes war-plate.

Another vox-distorted growl signifies Artarion has pulled the lance free from his leg. I have no time to witness his recovery. More beasts shriek before me – a thrashing wall of sick, jade flesh.

'We're losing this road,' Bastilan grunts, his signal marred by the sound of weapons crashing against his armour. 'We are but six, against a legion.'

'Five.' Nerovar's voice is strained as he fights with his chainblade two-handed, hewing down the beasts with none of Priamus's artistry but no less fury. 'Cador is dead.'

'Forgive me, brother,' Bastilan's voice breaks off as he fires a stream of bolter shells at point-blank range. 'A moment's lack of focus.'

Ahead, our targets – three junkyard tanks that have long since ceased to resemble their original Imperial Guard hulls – continue shelling the shelter block. These have none of the security offered by the subterranean shelters, for they are not civilian evacuation shelters at all. Each of these squat domes houses a thousand at capacity, designed to resist violent sandstorms and the tropical cyclones all too common on the equatorial coast – not sustained shelling from enemy armour. They are used now because there is nothing else to use, with the city grown far beyond its capacity to shelter all its citizens beneath the ground.

The beasts know us well. They seek to draw the city's forces into the most fevered fighting, so they hurl themselves at our defenceless civilians with sick cunning, knowing we will do all we can to defend these sites above any others.

How easy it is, to despise them.

‘Gnnh,’ Nerovar voxes, his voice wet and ruined by pain. I vault the falling corpse of the alien closest to me, and stand by his side – maul swinging with relentless motion – as our Apothecary struggles to rise again.

He fails. The beasts have brought him to his knees.

‘Gnnnnnh. Not coming out,’ he coughs. His hands clutch weakly at the axe hammered into his stomach. His gauntlets stroke without strength along the haft, gaining no grip. Blood from the sunder in his armour is painting his tabard scarlet. ‘Can’t do it.’

‘In the name of the Emperor,’ my chastisement comes forth as no more than a low growl, ‘stand and fight, or we all die.’

With Nerovar wounded and prone, he becomes a lodestone for the creatures desperate to deliver the death blow to one of the Emperor’s knights. They bellow and charge.

My crozius kills one. A kick to the sternum sends another staggering back long enough for me to bring the maul down on its head. A third is claimed by plasma fire, tumbling back as a blur of white-hot flame. Stinging ash, all that remains of the wretched alien, blasts back into the eyes of its bestial comrades.

Too many.

Even for us, this is too many.

I have a momentary glimpse of human families fleeing in all directions down the burning streets, able to escape while the horde focuses its fury on us. Several of the civilians are cut down by sponson fire from the junk-tanks, but many more survive – even if only to run blind into the unsafe labyrinth of their dying city. Before this war, I would never have counted such a thing to be a victory.

With a cry that mixes anger and pain, Nero tears the axe blade from his abdomen. Any relief I feel is swallowed, for he has no time to rise before the beasts are on us.

‘I see some knights,’ Andrej said. This announcement was followed by a whispered *‘Damn it,’* and the humming of his hellgun powering up again.

The work gang kept their backs to the rooftop’s low wall, with only Andrej peering over the edge to look down into the street. ‘Everybody, load rifles and be very ready.’

‘How many?’ Maghernus asked. ‘How many knights?’

‘Four. No, five. One is injured. I also see thirty of the enemy, and three tanks that were once our Leman Russes. Now, no more talking. Everybody take aim.’

The dockworkers did as ordered, drawing beads on the melee unfolding below.

‘Aim low,’ Maghernus told his men, drawing a silent smile from Andrej. ‘Aim for legs and torsos.’ No one needed to be told to be careful with their fire and not hit the Templars.

The storm trooper fired first, his bright lance of laser the signal for the others to join in. Lasguns bucked in increasingly sure hands, focusing lenses burning as they spat their lethal energy into the street below. The tearing laser fire punched into shoulders, legs, backs and arms, and the Imperials had managed three volleys before the beasts ripped their hungry attention from the knights and returned fire up at the men crouching on the warehouse rooftop.

‘Down!’ Andrej ordered the others. They obeyed, sinking back into cover. The storm trooper hunched lower, but remained where he was. He risked another shot, and another, splitting two aliens through the skull with pinpoint fire.

Around him, around them all, the low wall edging the roof was shredding under the surviving aliens’ fire, but it didn’t matter. The knights were free. Andrej crouched at last, after seeing the figure of one Templar, the knight’s armour more gunmetal grey than black now from battle damage, hurl aside three attackers and lay waste to them with his monstrous, crackling relic hammer.

His last act before falling back was to untrap his last det-pack, and set the timer for six seconds. With a roar of effort, Andrej hurled it down at street towards the tanks. It exploded a half-second after clanging against the lead tank’s turret, decapitating the war machine in a burst of noise and fire.

The Templars could deal with the other two.

‘Back!’ the storm trooper was laughing. ‘Back across the roof!’

‘What the hell is so funny?’ one of the dockworkers, Jassel, was complaining as they ran in crouches away from the disintegrating roof edge.

‘They weren’t just knights,’ Andrej’s voice was coloured by a sincere grin. ‘That was the Reclusiarch we just saved. Now, quick quick, down to the

street again.’

In the calm that followed, the streets gave birth to an atmosphere that was somewhere between serene and funereal. A very different warrior greeted Maghernus this time. The towering figure was far from the regal, impassive statue that merely acknowledged his existence with a nod.

The Reclusiarch’s armour still set his teeth on edge, its active hum making his eyes water if he stood too close. But Maghernus knew machines, even if he didn’t know ancient artefacts of war, and he could hear the faults in the war-plate now. Its once-smooth, angry purr had a waspish edge to its tone, and intermittent clicks told of something internal no longer running at full function. The joints of the battered armour no longer snarled with tensing fibre-cable muscles – they growled, as if reluctant to move.

Five weeks. Five weeks of fighting, night and day, in the same suit of armour, with the dock assault rising as the most punishing week yet. It was a miracle the armour still functioned at all.

The tabard was ripped and stained grey-green with alien blood. The scrolls that had adorned the warrior’s shoulders were gone, with only snapped chains showing they were ever held there at all. The armour itself was still impressive in its violent potential and faceless inhumanity, but where it had been blacker than black before the war, most of the blackness remaining was from scorch marks and laser burns marking the armour like bruises and claw wounds. Much of the war-plate was revealed in a dull, unpolished grey now that the paint was lost to a thousand weapon chops and glancing gunshots.

Somehow, it had the inelegant presence of a rifle or tank churned out of an Armageddon factory: plain, simple, but utterly brutal.

The other Templars looked no better. The one who bore the Reclusiarch’s standard now bore battle damage akin to his leader. The banner itself was a ragged ruin, little more than scraps hanging from the pole. The one with the white helm was barely able to stand, supported by two of the others. The voice that rasped from his mouth grille was a wordless, hacking cough.

And rather than humanise them, rather than reveal the warriors beneath the trappings and the knightly war gear, this damage instead stole what little personality had ever been in evidence to human eyes. How could any men, even ones shaped by genetic forges on a distant world, withstand so much

punishment and survive? How could they stand before others of their own species and seem so utterly unlike them?

‘Hello, Reclusiarch,’ said Andrej. He carried his hellgun, uncharged now, resting on his shoulder. He thought this made him look rakish and casual, and he was right. He looked that way to the dockworkers, at least.

Grimaldus’s voice didn’t growl or boom – it intoned, a low and bleak and grim drawl. It was all too easy to imagine this man back aboard a great, gothic warship, speaking a sermon to his brothers in the endless cold of void travel.

‘You have the thanks of the Black Templars, storm trooper. And you, dockworkers of Helsreach.’

‘It was good timing, I think,’ Andrej continued, a vague nod and the same smile showing he thought nothing of conversations with badly-wounded towering inhuman warriors surrounded by slaughtered aliens. ‘But the docks, they are not looking good. I am hearing no orders any more. So I see you, noble sirs, and I am wondering: perhaps they can give me orders.’

There was a pause, but not a silent one. The city was never silent, offering up a background chorus of gunfire rattles and the *crump* of distant explosions.

‘All units are called to the shelter blocks. Guard, militia, Adeptus Astartes. All.’

‘Even without my captain’s voice, we have followed that path. But there is more, sir.’

‘Speak.’ Grimaldus looked away now, the silver skull that served as his face glaring in the direction of a burning commerce district several streets away.

‘One of your knights fell at the docks. We have hidden his body from the enemy jackals. The etchings on his armour named him as Anastus.’

The white-helmed Adeptus Astartes spoke, his voice emerging like a man speaking through a mouthful of gruel.

‘Anastus died… as we deployed… last night. Life signs faded fast. Warrior’s death.’

Grimaldus nodded, his attention restored to the humans.

‘What is your name?’ the Reclusiarch asked the storm trooper.

‘Trooper Andrej, 703rd Steel Legion Storm trooper Division, sir.’

‘And yours?’ he asked the next man in line, taking every name until the

last, whom he recognised without needing to ask. ‘Dockmaster Tomaz Maghernus,’ the knight grunted, finally. ‘It is good to see you on the field. Courage such as yours belongs at the vanguard.’

Maghernus’s skin crawled, not with distaste but raw awkwardness. How does one reply to such a thing? To say he was honoured? To admit that every muscle in his body ached and he regretted ever volunteering for this madness?

‘Thank you, Reclusiarch,’ he managed.

‘I will remember your names and deeds this day. All of you. Helsreach may burn, but this war is not lost. Every one of your names will be etched into the black stone pillars of the Valiant Hall aboard the *Eternal Crusader.’*

Andrej nodded. ‘I am very honoured, Reclusiarch, as are these handsome and fine gentlemen with me. But if you could tell my captain about this, I would be even happier.’

The harsh sound emitted from the Reclusiarch’s vox-speakers was somewhere between a bark and a snarl. It took Maghernus several moments to realise it had been a laugh.

‘It will be done, Trooper Andrej. You have my word.’

‘I am hopeful this will also impress the lady I intend to marry.’

Grimaldus wasn’t sure how to reply to that. He settled for, ‘Yes. Good.’

‘Such optimism! But yes, I must find her first. Where do we move now, sir?’

‘West. The shelters in Sulfa Commercia. The alien dogs are taunting us.’ The Reclusiarch gestured with his massive hammer, the weapon’s power field deactivated for now. Between warehouses and manufactories, distant domes were aflame.

‘See them. Already, they burn.’

Priamus didn’t look where the others did. His attention was lifted higher, to the smog-thick skies.

‘What’s that?’ He gestured skywards, to a ball of flame trailing down. ‘It can’t be what it looks like.’

‘It is,’ Grimaldus replied, unable to look away from the sight.

‘Ayah!’ Andrej cheered as several similar objects appeared, blazing earthwards, leading fiery contrails like comets.

‘What are they?’ asked Maghernus, caught off-guard by the storm trooper’s capering and the knights’ reverence.

‘Drop pods,’ said the Reclusiarch. His silver skull turned amber with the reflection of the burning tank hulls nearby. ‘Adeptus Astartes drop pods.’

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CHAPTER XVII

INTO THE FIRES OF BATTLE, UNTO THE ANVIL OF WAR

The Sulfa Commercia district had been a bastion of militia reserves and a strongpoint for the docks' anti-air defences.

The few turrets that remained atop buildings, both automated and manned, fell silent. Around them, the district burned. Above them, ork fighters and bombers dropped their payloads with abandon, barely held in check even when the defence turrets were operational.

Sulfa Commercia, as a trading hub for the western docks that was always densely populated in times of peace, was home to a particularly large concentration of above-ground storm shelters, most of which were already broken by the besieging orks. The enemy advance was at a standstill in this section of the dockyards, not because of Imperial resistance, but because there was so much blood to shed, and so much to destroy. To leave the area devoid of life and in utter ruin meant the aliens had to linger here, slaying with wild joy in their feral eyes.

When writing of the siege in a personal journal some years after the war, Major Lacus of the 61st Steel Legion lamented the 'unbelievable loss of life' that occurred with the dock breaches, citing the destruction of the Sulfa Commercia as 'among the bloodiest events in the Helsreach siege, which no man, no tank battalion, no legion of Titans could have dreamed of preventing'.

The trading concourse resembled little of its former grandeur. While warehouses were less in evidence here, the houses of the wealthy mercantile families of Helsreach burned just as well, and those citizens that had elected to remain in their homes rather than seek out the subterranean

municipal shelters now fell to the same fate as the civilians trapped in the cracked-open storm shelters. The aliens descended without mercy, and no contingent of house guards, no matter how well trained they were, were capable of defending their lords' estates against the xenos tide that swarmed the docks districts.

The most notable defence – one that captured the spirit of defiance surging throughout the hive's stunted propaganda machine – was not, as might be suspected, the one that inflicted greatest harm upon the enemy. The estate defence that did the most damage numerically-speaking was performed by the House Farwellian Constabulary, employed for seven generations by the noble Farwell bloodline. Their extended survival wasn't quite the soul-lifting story that Commissar Falkov and Colonel Sarren were seeking, as the esteemed House Farwell were, in truth, considered decadent pigs in the public eye, and its various scions were no strangers to political scandal, financial investigation, and rumours of trade double-dealing. In short, they performed so well in this district war because they had shrewdly cheated their way to immense wealth, and had a standing army of six hundred soldiers at their beck and call.

A standing army that, it was noted in Imperial records, the Farwells refused to lend to the defence of the docks or the city's militia.

This sizeable force was also their bane. As words flashed through the orkish ranks that there was a nexus of defence formed at the House Farwell compound, the aliens stormed it en masse, ending the tenacious resistance – and the bloodline itself.

The most notable defence, as stated, was a far cry from this exercise in doomed selfishness. House Tarracine, with only five off-world mercenaries hired as protection, defended their modest estate through a series of guerrilla strikes and automated security traps for nineteen hours. Although their home was destroyed by the invaders, seven family members emerged unscathed in the days after the dock battle, leaving them in a relatively strong position for the rebuilding of the city, with Lord Helius Tarracine's four daughters suddenly pursued with great vigour by weakened and heirless noble bloodlines.

At shelter CC/46, one of the few shelters still intact as the second day of the dock war stretched on, annihilation was averted at the very last moment.

The first drop pod came down with a thunderbolt's force, striking into the

roadway leading to the front doors of the sanctuary dome. The ork rabble that had been clamouring in the street was thrown into disarray, and several of the beasts were incinerated in the pod's retro burst or crushed beneath its hammering weight.

The pod's sides blasted open, slamming down into descent ramps which pulverised the beasts that had recovered enough to start beating their axe blades against the green hull.

Across the docks, several more pods rained down, their arrival mirroring the destruction unleashed by the first.

With bolters raised, crashing out round after round, and flamers breathing dragon's breath in hissing gouts of chemical fire, the Salamanders joined their Templars brothers in defence of Hive Helsreach.

'We are seventy in number,' he says to me. Seven squads.

His name is V'reth, a sergeant of the Salamanders' Sixth Company. Before I speak, he says something both humbling and unexpectedly respectful. 'I am honoured to fight at your side, Reclusiarch Grimaldus.'

This confession throws me, and I am not certain I keep my surprise from my voice when I reply.

'The Templars are in your debt. But tell me, brother, why you have come?'

Around us, my knights and V'reth's warriors stalk among the dead and the dying, slaying wounded orks with sword thrusts to exposed throats. The storm trooper and his dockworkers follow suit, using the bayonets of their rifles.

V'reth disengages his helm's seals and lifts it clear. Even having served with the Salamanders before, it is difficult to look upon one of the sons of Nocturne and feel nothing at all. The gene-seed of their primarch reacts to their home world's viciously radioactive surface. The pigmentation of V'reth's skin is the same charcoal-black as every unhelmeted warrior of the Chapter I've ever seen. His eyes lack pupils and irises. Instead, V'reth stares out at the world around us through orbs of ember red, as if blood has filled his eye sockets and discoloured his eyes in the process.

His true voice is a low, aural embodiment of the igneous rock that leaves the surface of his home world dark, barren and grey. It is all too easy to see how these warriors come from a world of lava rivers and volcanic mountain ranges that turn the sky black.

‘We were the last of the Salamanders in orbit. The Lord of the Fire-born called us to him, and we obeyed.’

I am familiar with the title. I have heard their Chapter Master referred to by this name many times before.

‘Master Tu’Shan, may the Emperor continue to favour him, fights far from here, brother. The Salamanders bleed the enemy many leagues to the east, and the Hemlock river runs black with alien blood.’

V’reth inclines his head in a solemn nod, and his red-eyed gaze rises to take in the shelter dome at the end of this very street.

‘This is so, and it gladdens me to know my brothers fight well enough to earn such words from you, Reclusiarch. The Lord of the Fire-born makes his stand with the war engines of Legios Ignatum and Invigilata.’

‘So answer my question, for time is not our ally. Helsreach burns. Will you stay? Will you fight with us?’

‘We will not stay. We cannot stay.’

I bite back the wrath that rises from disappointment, and the Salamander continues, ‘We are the seventy warriors chosen to make planetfall here and stand with you until the docks are held. My lord and master heard of the assured civilian devastation in the fall of this city’s coastal districts.’

‘Few messages reach the ears of our allies elsewhere in the world. Few messages from them reach us.’

‘The Salamanders were not blind to your plight, honoured Reclusiarch. Master Tu’Shan heard. We are his blade, his will, to ensure the survival of the city’s most innocent souls.’

‘And then you will leave.’

‘And then we will leave. Our fight is along the banks of the Hemlock. Our glory is there.’

This gesture alone is enough to earn my eternal gratitude. For the first time in decades, emotion steals the words I wish to voice. This is all we needed. This is salvation.

We can hurt them now.

I remove my own helm, breathing in the first taste of Helsreach’s sulphuric air in… weeks. Months.

V’reth inhales deeply, doing the same.

‘This city,’ he smiles, teeth white against his onyx features, ‘it smells like home.’

The heated wind feels good on my skin. I offer my hand to V'reth, and he grips my wrist – an alliance between warriors.

'Thank you,' I tell him, meeting his inhuman eyes.

'If you are needed elsewhere,' V'reth matches my gaze with his own, 'then go to your duty, honoured Reclusiarch. We stand with you, for now. And together, we will not let these docks fall.'

'First, tell me of the orbital war. What news of the *Crusader*?'

'The deadlock remains. It grieves me to say this, but it is so. We are - shattering the enemy, battle by battle, but it is like hurling fire at stone. Little is achieved against such an overwhelming foe. It will take weeks before your High Marshal dares a full assault to reclaim the heavens. He is a shrewd warrior. My brothers and I were honoured to serve with him in the fleet.'

To hear his words is like a lifeline. A connection to existence beyond the broken walls of this accursed city. I press him for more.

'What of Tempestus Hive? They suffered as we did.'

'Fallen. Lost to the enemy, its forces in retreat. The last word from any remnant of command structure was that the city was being abandoned, and its retreating survivors were making their way overland to connect with the Guard regiments serving alongside my lord and master.'

Scattered defence forces and Guard units, crossing hundreds of kilometres of wasteland. Such tenacity was to be admired.

This world will never recover, that much is clear. Fatalism may not be bred into my bones, but there is no valour in living a lie. What we do here is defiance – the selling of life as dearly as possible. We are not fighting to win, but waging war out of spite.

This Salamander, brother though he may be, has a destiny beyond this city. I relent to it.

'Coordinate the dispersal of squads with Sergeant Bastilan. Focus your efforts on the westernmost districts, where the bulk of storm shelters are to be found. Bastilan will provide you with the required vox frequencies to connect with the storm troopers leading the civilian defences. Do not expect clarity in communications. Many of the city's vox-relay towers have fallen.'

'It will be done, Reclusiarch.'

'For the Emperor.' I release V'reth's wrist. His reply is a curious one, betraying his Chapter's unique focus.

‘For the Emperor,’ he says, ‘and His people.’

Jurisian, Master of the Forge and knight of the Emperor, threw his head back and laughed. He had not laughed in many years, for he was not a soul given to humour. What he was seeing now however struck him as immensely funny. So he laughed, without meaning to.

The sound echoed throughout the immense chamber, resounding off metal-reinforced walls of stone and the hulking adamantium shape that stretched for fifty metres into the darkness.

The Ordinatus Armageddon. *Oberon.*

Jurisian’s armour had been the only sound in the chamber for hours, the overlaid ceramite plating clacking and whirring as he moved around the great weapon. He’d circled it several dozen times, staring, scanning, taking in every detail with his own eyes and his war-plate’s auspex sensors.

It was, without question, the most beautiful creation he had ever laid his augmetic eyes upon.

In aesthetics, perhaps it would not appeal to a poet or a painter. But that was hardly the point. In power, it would appeal to any general in the Imperium. It was a triumph of design and intent, a glorious success in mankind’s quest to master a greater ability to destroy its enemies.

The great construct consisted of a strong, three-sectioned base that held up a weapons platform on gantries and struts. Atop the platform was the weapon itself. Jurisian considered each aspect of the war machine in turn, silent in its deactivation.

From the front, *Oberon* was as wide as two bulky Land Raider battle tanks side by side. Its length was fifty metres in total, giving it the appearance of a land train, long and segmented. Immense to say the least, it was of approximate size to a towering battle Titan lying on its back.

The war machine’s base was divided into three sections – a helm segment, the drive module, with a reinforced cockpit chamber; a thorax section next, pinned under the weight of massive metal stanchions; lastly, an abdomen segment, bearing the same weight as the section before. Each of these base sections was bulked up further by side-mounted power generators, shielded behind yet more armour plating. These, Jurisian knew, were the gravitational suspensor generators. Anti-gravitational technology on such a scale was no longer heard of in the Imperium, except for the deployment of

war machines of this calibre.

These generators' rarity made them the most precious thing on the entire planet, bar nothing.

The stanchions and gantries supported the colossal weapons platform, which in turn housed dozens of square metres of energy pods, fusion chambers and magnetic field generators. It was as if an industrial manufactorum had been installed on the back of a column of tanks.

These generators would, if active, supply power to the land train's weapon mount: a tower of a cannon forged of heat-shielded ceramite and joined to the forward power generators. Coolant vents ran the length of the cannon like reptilian scales. Like parasitic worms, nests of secondary power feed cables hung from the barrel, while industrial support claws held the weapon in place.

A nova cannon. A weapon used by starships to end one another across the immensity of the void. Here it was, mounted on priceless and infinitely-armoured anti-gravitational technology from a forgotten age.

'Titan-killer,' the Master of the Forge whispered.

Jurisian reverently stroked his gloved fingertips down the drive section's metallic skin, feeling the thick armour plating, the chunky rivets… down to the miniscule differences in the layers of adamantium: the tiniest variations and imperfections from its forging process hundreds of years before.

He'd withdrawn his hand, and that was when he'd laughed.

Oberon, the Death of Titans. It was real. It was here.

And it was his.

He gained access to the forward command module through a ladder leading to a bulkhead that required opening manually. Once inside the powerless cockpit chamber, Jurisian spared a glance for the winches, levers and black, blank screens along the drive console. It was all new, all alien to him, but nothing he considered beyond his intuition and Mechanicus training. Another bulkhead barred his way to the second module. With the Ordinatus powered down, this one also required him to manually turn the iron wheel on its surface.

The door squealed open with the reluctance of an unused airlock. Jurisian's gaze pierced the blackness beyond with aid from his helm's vision filters. It was confined and claustrophobic, despite there being little in the module beyond armoured pods fixed to the walls that housed the

power generators for the anti-grav lifters, and crew ladders leading up into the main generatorium on the platform above. Jurisian ascended, opening another two bulkheads as he rose through the support gantries.

The innards of the platform-top generatorium were familiar enough in their cluttered, industrial layout. He stood within the heart of a spaceship's weapon system, condensed to offer less range and power, but on a more manoeuvrable and manageable scale. The projectiles from this sacred cannon didn't, after all, have to travel across thousands of kilometres of open space to strike a target.

It was, bluntly speaking, the sawn-off shotgun of nova cannon technology. The notion brought a smile to Jurisian's mirthless lips.

It took a further three hours of investigation, feed-checks and generator testing to ascertain whether the Ordinatus Armageddon could be reactivated, and how such a feat could be achieved.

The result at the close of the investigations was a bittersweet one.

This weapon of war should have been crewed by dozens of specialist skitarii, magi and tech-adepts, born and raised for this purpose above all others. It should have been ritually blessed by the Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus and its newest duty inscribed upon its hull alongside the ninety-three prayers of reawakening.

Instead of the chanting and worship due to the spirit of such a war engine, the soul of *Oberon* awoke in silence and darkness. Its vague, reforming consciousness did not detect a gestalt host of abased Centurio Ordinatus minds supplicating themselves for its attention, but a single other soul in union with its own.

This soul was strong: ironclad and dominant.

It identified itself as Jurisian.

In the drive module, his brain, spine and body armour linked via telemetry cables to the interface feeds in the princeps throne, the Master of the Forge closed his eyes. Around him, the systems flared into life. Scanners chimed as they began to see again. Overhead lights flickered and held at low illumination settings.

With a great shudder and the accompanying thrumming of power generators coming back to life, all three modules shook once, twice, and jolted hard.

In the drive section, Jurisian lurched in his seat. He hadn't jolted forward,

but *up*.

Five metres up.

There the modules remained, cradled on a pulsing anti-grav field that distorted the ground below with something that was, and was not, a heat-shimmer.

‘Activation Phase One,’ the war machine’s voice issued from vox-speakers around the command module.

Beneath the mechanical tone seethed a roiling, uncoiling hatred. Jurisian bowed his head in respect, but did not cease his work.

‘My brothers call me to Helsreach,’ he spoke into the cold control pod, expecting no answer and receiving none. ‘And though that may mean nothing, I know that war calls to you.’

Through the interface connection, the spirit of *Oberon* growled, the sound inhuman and untranslatable.

Jurisian nodded. ‘I thought so.’

Asavan Tortellius lingered over a single phrase.

He had no idea how to describe just how cold he was.

Around him, the deserted cathedral still bore more than its share of wall scars and battle damage. On a fallen block of masonry, the acolyte composed his memoirs of the Helsreach war, while the great Titan pitched slowly forward and back in the rough rhythm of walking. Occasionally, air pressure and gravity would exert themselves on his left or right side, as *Stormherald* rounded a corner. As he had done for years, Asavan ignored these things.

The ruined cathedral around him was altogether harder to ignore. It still appeared much as it had over thirty days ago, when the alien brutes had brought the god-machine to its knees. The statues still lay as alabaster corpses in broken, facedown repose, limbs cracked off to lie several metres distant. The walls were still decorated by gunfire holes and ugly cracks that cobwebbed outwards from impact points. The stained glass windows – his only succour from the irritation of the Shield above – were still gaping holes in the war-blackened architecture, as unpleasant to look upon as missing teeth in the smile of a saint.

Day in, day out, Asavan sat in the lonely, contemplative quiet of the cathedral, and composed what he knew full well were poorly-worded

poems commemorating the coming victory in Hive Helsreach. He would destroy well over half of what he wrote, sometimes wincing as he reread the words he'd brought into being.

But of course, there was no one else to witness them. Not here.

The cathedral had stood almost empty since it had been besieged. The Templars had come, 'in purity, protecting us, and in wrath, indefatigable,' Asavan had written (before deleting the cringe-worthy words forever), but they had come too late to do much more than preserve the wounded, hollow bones of *Stormherald*'s monastery. Weeks had passed since. Weeks during which nothing had changed, nothing had been repaired.

Asavan was one of the few people still living in the cathedral. His fellows consisted mainly of servitors hardwired into the battlement turrets, slaved to the targeting and reloading systems along the walls. He saw these wretches often, because it had become his duty to keep them alive. The lobotomised, augmented once-humans were little more than limbless and slack-jawed automatons installed in life support cradles next to their turret cannons, and had no means to sustain their own existences. Several had lost their feed/waste bio connection cables with the damage taken in the siege, and even all these weeks later, the remaining magi in *Stormherald*'s main body had not reached repairs so minor on the long list of abuses in need of correcting. Key systems took priority, and few enough Mechanicus adepts remained alive as it was. The fighting had been fierce below, as well.

So it fell to Asavan, as one of the few cathedral survivors, to spoonfeed these mindless creatures with soft protein-rich paste in order to keep them from dying, and flush their waste filters once a week.

He did this not because he was ordered to, or because he particularly cared about the continuing functionality of the handful of battlement cannons that were still unscathed. He did it because he was bored, and because he was lonely. It was the second week when he started talking to the unresponsive servitors. By the fourth, they all had names and backstories.

At first, Asavan had sought to order one of the seven medial servitors still patrolling the cathedral to perform these actions, but their programming was cripplingly limited. One was mono-tasked with walking from room to room, broom in hand, sweeping up any dust from the boots of the faithful.

Well, there were no faithful any more. And the servitor had no broom. Asavan had known the servitor before his augmentation, as a particularly

dull-witted acolyte that earned his fate for stealing coins from his lay-brothers. His punishment was to be rendered into a bionic slave, and Asavan had shed no tears at the time. Still, it was no joy to see the simple creature stagger from chamber to chamber, clacking the broken end of a brushless broomstick against the rubble-strewn ground, never getting closer to cleaning up the mess, and unable to rest until its duty was done. It refused orders to cease work, and Asavan suspected what was left of its mind had been broken at some point during the battle. An unnoticed head wound, perhaps.

Six weeks in, the servitor had collapsed in the middle of a row of broken pews, its human parts no longer able to function without rest. Asavan had done with it as he'd done with all of the slain. He and the handful of survivors threw the body overboard. A morbid curiosity (and one that he always regretted afterwards) compelled him to watch as the bodies fell fifty metres to rupture on the ground below. Asavan took no thrill or amusement from such sights, but found he could never look away. In work he quickly erased, he confessed to himself that seeing the bodies fall was a means of reminding himself he was still alive. Whatever the truth of the situation, the sights gave him nightmares. He wondered how soldiers could get used to such things, and why they would ever want to.

His main concern this past week was the cold.

With the Titan committed to battle for this prolonged engagement, the damage it had sustained in the ambush weeks ago was forever being repaired, compensated for, and re-aggravated by new war wounds sustained in the conflict. The command crew (*'blessings be upon them as they lead us to triumph,'* Asavan still whispered) were drawing ever-increasing maintenance attention and power from secondary systems throughout the Titan.

Minor systems went unrepaired by the adept tech-teams that were already spread thin throughout the gigantic construct and dealing with the vital systems. Some systems even went powerless as energy feeds were drained and disconnected, their thrumming fuel flooded to the plasma cells used to power the Shield and the main weapons.

A week ago, the heating systems to the cathedral had been drained to the point of no longer functioning. With typical Mechanicus efficiency, there were secondary and tertiary fallback options in the case of such a

development. Unfortunately for Asavan and the few acolytes left alive up there, both the secondary and tertiary contingencies were lost. The secondary fallback had been a smaller, self-sustaining generator that fed itself from a power source reserve that was linked to nothing else, and could therefore never be drained for other purposes. The generator was now no more than scrap metal in the ruined mess that had once been the cathedral's maintenance deck.

The generator's destruction also annihilated the tertiary contingency plan, which was for four mono-tasked servitors – good for nothing else – to be activated and set to turn the generator's manual pumps by hand. Even if the generator had been fully functional, all four of the servitors were killed in the battle five weeks ago.

Asavan had gamely tried to turn the first of the hand-cranks himself, but lacking a servitor's strength meant all he achieved was a sore back. The crank never moved a centimetre.

So now, here he sat on a fallen pillar, trying to compose something to describe how bone-achingly cold he was, and how bone-achingly cold he had been for the last six days.

In place of organs, *Stormherald* possessed a generator core of intensely radioactive and fusion-hot plasma. Asavan found it a curious paradox that the heart of a sun was hermetically sealed and insulated many decks below him, yet here he was, on the edge of freezing to death.

These were the kinds of observations that he would write down, and then destroy in shame at daring to complain while so many innocent Imperial souls were out there in the burning city, dying moment by moment.

It was in that moment Asavan Tortellius decided he would change fate himself. He would not freeze to death on the Titan's back, in this hollow monastery. Nor would he gripe about the cold while thousands of deserving and loyal people died in their droves.

His fellow acolytes had never been kind to him regarding his intelligence, but people could say what they wished about his wits, slow or otherwise – Asavan liked to believe he always arrived at the right answer eventually. And now he had.

Yes. It was time to make a difference to the people of Helsreach.

It was time to leave the Titan.

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CHAPTER XVIII

CONSOLIDATION

Three more nights passed as every day had passed before them. The docks were lost at dawn on the sixth day after the submersible assault.

The defeat was unusual enough to bring the Imperial commanders together again. Around the battle-damaged hull of the *Grey Warrior,* Sarren gathered the leaders. In the dawn gloom, most of the Guard colonels were dead on their feet with fatigue, several showing telltale signs of combat narcotics to keep them going – a twitch here, a shiver there. Overtaxed minds and muscles could only be kept active for so long, even with stimulants.

Sarren wouldn't reprimand them for this. In times of need, men did as they must in order to hold the line.

'We've lost the docks,' he said, and his voice was as tired and scratchy as he felt. This was not news to any of the gathered officers. As the colonel outlined the details of what little remained of the dock districts, a Chimera rumbled up to park in the *Grey Warrior*'s shadow. The crew ramp slammed down, and two people disembarked. The first was Cyria Tyro, her uniform still clean but clearly ruffled from constant wear. The second was dressed in a pilot's grey flightsuit.

'I've found him,' Tyro said, leading the pilot to the gathered commanders.

'Captain Helius reporting,' the pilot saluted Sarren. 'Commander Jenzen died two nights ago, sir.'

Third in line, after Jenzen and Barasath? They were lucky to have any flyers left.

'A pleasure, captain.'

'As you say, sir.'

Sarren nodded, returning the aquila salute with his wounded arm still aching like a jungle wildfire. A morning breeze, chilling and unwelcome, gusted across the stretch of the Hel's Highway. The Baneblade's hull blocked most of the wind, but not enough as far as Sarren was concerned. Throne, he was tired of aching all over.

'Remaining forces?'

'Three airstrips, though it looks like the Gamma Road will fall today; it's been besieged for days now. At last count, we had twenty-six Lightnings remaining. Only seven Thunderbolts. Gamma Road is already being evacuated and the fighters are landing on the Vancia Chi Avenue.'

Sarren made a grumbling noise. He still lamented the loss of Barasath and the majority of his air power, even after all this time.

'Intentions?'

'Currently, no change from Jenzen's orders. Provide air support for embattled Titan forces and armour battalions. The enemy are still showing next to no offensive capacity in the air. It's reasonable to suggest that, this far in, they've simply got nothing left.'

'Was that a barb, captain?'

Helius saluted again. 'By no means, sir.'

Sarren smiled, the indulgent grin ruined by weariness. 'If it was, it's forgiven. Barasath was right, and he sold his life at great cost to give us an edge in the air. The beasts have thrown up nothing but a handful of scrap-fighters since the siege began, and I've already noted on the campaign record – as well as Barsath's personal file – that he made the right call.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm sorry to hear about Jenzen. She was an asset we'll greatly miss: solid, reliable, steady.'

And she had been. Commander Carylin Jenzen, for better or worse, had been a by-the-book flyer, dependable and constant, if rather uninspired. Under her, the city's air forces had maintained a campaign of reliable defensive support for over a month. The Crone of Invigilata herself had commended Jenzen's endeavours in recent weeks.

'Sir…' Helius began.

Here it comes… Sarren thought.

'I had hoped to discuss the possibility of a more aggressive tactical pattern.'

Yes. Yes, of course you had hoped to discuss that.

‘In good time. For now, the docks.’

Sarren nodded back to the gathered officers. Cyria Tyro and Captain Helius joined them, standing next to one another. Major Ryken scowled at the pilot, and Sarren resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *Bloody Throne, Ryken. Now is hardly the time for schoolyard jealousy.*

‘We did not lose the docks,’ one of the Adeptus Astartes argued, his vox-voice laden with resonant calm. Colonel Sarren had not met Sergeant V’reth of the Salamanders before this morning. He knew from vox-traffic that the green-armoured warriors had deployed close to the remaining civilian shelters and their valour was directly responsible for a great many lives spared.

But it seemed his tactical outlook varied wildly from the colonel’s.

‘I’m not sure I understand, sir,’ Sarren offered.

V’reth’s armour was dented and scratched, but remained pristine in comparison to the wreckage worn by the Reclusiarch at his side. A golden-eyed helm glared down at the human officers.

‘I am merely stating, Colonel Sarren, that we did not lose the docks. The enemy is beaten. The seaborne invasion was denied, for the city still stands. The invaders lie dead at the docks.’

This was and wasn’t true, from the way Sarren looked at it. The disparity was the reason the colonel had called this gathering.

‘Allow me to amend my appraisal. The docks are gone. As an industrial factor in Armageddon’s collective output, Helsreach no longer exists. We’re receiving reports now of ninety-one per cent harm to the city’s refinery infrastructure, taking into account the loss of the offshore oil platforms.’

The soldiers shared uncomfortable glances. The Imperium demanded heavy tithes of materiel from Armageddon. If the other hive cities suffered as Helsreach had, the grade of Exactis Extremis would be lowered significantly. Certainly to Solutio Tertius, and perhaps to Aptus Non. If Armageddon provided nothing, it would be offered little in return. The Imperium would turn away. Without the support and finances to recover after the war, the world might never recover.

‘However, all is not dark. As the noble Sergeant V’reth makes clear, thanks to the tenacity of the dockworker population, our own storm troopers, and our Adeptus Astartes allies, the xenos were repelled.’

At insane cost, he decided not to add. *Tens of thousands dead in four days. The city's industry reduced to a worthless husk.*

'We have received further word from the Crone of Invigilata,' the colonel continued. What he had to say next almost caught in his throat. 'The most honourable Legio Invigilata has been petitioned by outside forces to leave the city.'

'She will stay.' The Reclusiarch's tone was cold even through his helm's vox-speakers. 'She swore to fight.'

'As I understand it, the Imperial advances along the length of the Hemlock River are grinding to a halt. The settlements there, protected by the Salamanders and regiments of the Cadian Shock, are now considered a higher priority than the city.' Sarren let the words resonate for a few moments. 'This is from the Old Man himself. It came over the vox an hour ago.'

Grimaldus snarled as he spoke, 'I do not care. Our mandate is to defend Helsreach.'

'*Our* mandate, yes. But Princeps Zarha's mandate was to deploy where she desired. Most of the Legio Invigilata is already stationed along the Hemlock and across the wastelands, alongside elements from Ignatum and Metalica.'

'She will not leave,' Grimaldus snorted. 'She is here until the end.'

Sarren felt his ire rising at the way the Reclusiarch dismissed his concerns with such blasé finality. On another day, another morning, after any other week of fighting, he would have reined in his emotions better. As it was, he sighed and closed his gritty eyes.

'Enough, *please*, Reclusiarch. *Stormherald* is embattled seven kilometres down the Hel's Highway, with an enemy scrap-Titan battalion in the Rostorik Ironworks. She has given no further word of her decision.'

Grimaldus crossed his arms over his ruined heraldry. 'Tartarus Hive and the battles along the shores of the Hemlock will be won and lost without us. This war has taken everything from the city, and we are reduced to fighting like desert jackals over Helsreach's bones. The only question that matters to us is: What can we still save?'

Ryken removed his rebreather and took a deep breath. 'It may be time to consider the last fallback point.'

Sarren nodded. 'That's why we're here. We stand in the heart of a dying city, and the time has come to decide where we will make our final stand.

What of the… weapon, Reclusiarch?’

‘A fool’s hope. The Master of the Forge is a single soul. Without Mechanicus support, Jurisian has been able to do nothing more than activate *Oberon*’s core systems. He can certainly not crew it alone. As of four nights ago, the Ordinatus has locomotion, and on his own the Forgemaster is able to fire the Oberon Cannon once every twenty-two minutes. But that is all. It cannot be defended by a lone pilot. It is worthless in battle.’

The colonel’s ire rose again. ‘You waited four days to tell me of this? That the Ordinatus has power once more?’

‘I have not waited. I filed coded confirmation across the command network the same night I learned *Oberon* was operational. Yet as I said, it is almost worthless to us.’

‘Is your Forgemaster bringing the weapon to the city?’

‘Of course.’

‘Has the Mechanicus been informed we are defiling their weapon and dragging it into a warzone, almost certain to lose it in its first engagement against the enemy?’

‘Of course not. Are you insane, human? The best weapons are those that remain secret until wielded. This truth would force Invigilata to act against us, or to leave the city.’

‘You are not the commander of this city. You surrendered that honour to me. This is information I have been eagerly awaiting, only to find it denied to me because of broken vox-traffic?’

The silver skull breathed out a mechanical growl.

‘I was knee-deep in alien dead at the docks, Sarren, selling the lives of my brothers to ensure the people of your home world lived to see another sunrise. You are tired. I understand the limitations of the human form, and you have my sympathies for them. But remember to whom you are speaking.’

Sarren bit back his disappointment. It wasn’t supposed to be like this, yet with the Adeptus Astartes, it always was. Compliant and valuable one moment, superior and distant the next, shaped as much by their fierce independence as they were by their loyalty to the Imperium.

It felt… petty. That was the only word that encapsulated it in the colonel‘s mind. An awkward divide between humans fighting for their home, and

once-humans fighting for intangible ideals and heroic codes of conduct.

'Well…' Sarren began, but knew he had nowhere to go with the words.

'I am not to blame for your malfunctioning vox. It is a plague upon the city's defence, and a burden we must bear. I was not about to abandon the docks to deliver the news into your ears like some enslaved courier, nor would I entrust such a development to any other soul. If the Mechanicus learns of this, we lose Invigilata.'

'None of us had much hope pinned on the Ordinatus,' Ryken said, seeking to defuse the tension. 'It was the longest of long shots, any way you slice it.'

'Have you tried the Mechanicus forces again?' Cyria Tyro asked. Her tone didn't hide the fact she still pinned a great deal of hope on the weapon, despite what Ryken had just said.

'Of course.' The Reclusiarch gestured west along the Hel's Highway, in the direction of *Stormherald* fighting out of sight in the Ironworks. 'Zarha refused as she refused before. It is blasphemy to do what we have done.'

'Still no word from Mechanicus royalty,' Sarren put in. 'Wherever this arch-priest of theirs is, he's not responding to any of our astropathic pleas.'

He spat onto the broken roadway beneath his feet. Indeed, whoever this Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus was, his arrival in the Armageddon system would be far too late to make a difference to Helsreach.

'At least the weapon may yet be put to use in the defence of other cities,' the colonel forced a chuckle. 'We stand on the very edge now. The fallback plan is, however, not something I wish to consider any more. There are few enough surviving Imperial forces left in the city. Let us not gather together for the last days of our lives and offer an easy target.'

'So it's over,' one of the captains said.

'No,' Grimaldus answered. 'But we must keep the enemy locked in the city as long as we can. Each day we survive increases the chances of reinforcement from the Ash Wastes. Each day we hold out costs the enemy more blood, and keeps them here in Helsreach, where they cannot add their axes to the beasts besieging the other cities.'

Ryken scratched at his collar, soothing an itching scar he'd earned the week before.

'Uh. Sir?' he said to Sarren.

'Major?'

Ryken let his expression of disbelief do the talking. Sarren rubbed grit from his eyes with dirty fingertips as he answered. ‘I have studied the hololithic projections in the wake of the dock siege. I have managed, blessings upon the Emperor, to actually maintain a conversation over the vox with Commissar Yarrick that lasted for more than ten seconds, and offered more productivity than merely listening to the crackle of static for once. We are following a pattern being used in several of the other hive cities. The Steel Legion will disperse throughout the city, centring at population centres that remain untouched.’

‘What about the highway?’

‘The enemy already claims most of it, Captain Helius. Let them have the rest. As of this morning, we are no longer fighting to preserve the city. We are fighting to save every life that can be saved. The city is dead, but over half of its people are not.’

The captain scowled, rendering his handsome face immediately unattractive. Unreliable friends borrowed a great deal of money with expressions like that.

‘None of our remaining airstrips are anywhere near civilian population centres. Forgive me for pointing it out, colonel, but that was the very point of setting them up where we did. To hide them.’

‘You did well. And I’m certain you will hold off the enemy for an admirable space of time before you are overrun. Just like the rest of us.’

‘We need to be defended!’

‘No. You would *like* to be defended. You do not wish to die. None of us do, captain. But I command the Steel Legion, and the Steel Legion marches in defence of the hive’s people now. I cannot spare regiments of men just to continue covering the air squadron’s inexorable dance across the city. The plain truth is that there are no longer enough of you to be worth defending. Hide when you must, and fight when you can. If Invigilata stands with us, fly in support of them. If Invigilata leaves, then fly in support of the 121st Armoured Division, who will be based at the Kolav Residentia District, defending the entrances to the subterranean bunkers. Those are your orders.’

The captain’s salute was reluctant. ‘Understood, sir.’

‘The coming weeks will go into Imperial records as the ‘hundred bastions of light’. We no longer have the forces required to defend large swathes of

territory. So we will fall back to the cores – the most vital points – and die before we ever give another metre of ground. The Jaega District, with its storm shelters. The Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, at the heart of the Ecclesiarchal sector. The Azal Spaceport in the Dis industrial sector. The Purgatori Refinery, that blessedly still stands on the docks. A list of primary and secondary defence points is being circulated over the vox-network and via hundreds of courier teams throughout the city.'

The colonel turned to the hulking figures of the Adeptus Astartes. 'Sergeant V'reth, the people of Helsreach and Armageddon offer their thanks to you and your brothers for the assistance. You'll quit the city today?'

'The Lord of the Fire-born calls.'

'Quite so, quite so. I offer my personal thanks. Without your arrival, many more would have lost their lives.'

V'reth made the sign of the aquila, his green gauntlets forming the familiar shape to mirror the bronze eagle on his chest.

'You are fighting with ferocity unmatched, Steel Legionnaire. The Emperor sees all and knows all. He sees your sacrifices and your courage in this war, and you are earning your place in the Imperium's legends. It was an honour to fight at your side, on the streets of your city.'

Sarren glanced between the two Adeptus Astartes – the warrior and the knight. He could not doubt the valour of the Templars in past weeks, but Throne, if only he'd had the Salamanders here. They were everything the Templars were not: communicative, supportive, *reliable.*..

He found himself offering his hand. A moment's tension followed the gesture, as the towering warrior remained unmoving. Then, with care, the Salamander held the colonel's small, human hand in a shake. The joints of the sergeant's power armour hummed with the minor movement.

'The honour was ours, V'reth. Hunt well in the wastelands, and give my thanks to your lord.'

The Reclusiarch watched this in silence. No one knew what expression was masked by his relic helm.

Once the discussion is done, I walk from the gathered humans. V'reth remains with me, shadowing my movements. Away from the pitted and cracked hull of Sarren's Baneblade, I slow in my stride to allow him to

catch up. Does V’reth not have his own orders to obey? Does the Hemlock not call? Curious that he chooses to remain.

‘What do you want, Salamander?’

As we walk along the Hel’s Highway, I cannot help but stare at the city below. The platformed road rises above the habitation blocks here, once allowing traffic to rattle through the heart of the city between the spires of its tall residential towers. Now it remains aloft – a rockcrete wave riding above urban devastation. The buildings here are flattened, reduced to rubble by the enemy’s scrap-Titans and shelling from our own forces.

Across the city, the Highway has come down in several places. Fortunate that it has not done so here, as well.

‘To speak, if you are willing, Reclusiarch.’

‘I would be honoured,’ I tell him, but this is a lie. We have spent a week fighting together, side by side, and although his presence was invaluable, his warriors are not knights. Too often, they fell back to guard civilian shelters rather than press the attack and prevent the enemy from escaping. Too often they withstood repeated assaults rather than strike first and eliminate any need of further retaliation.

Priamus loathes them, but I do not. Their ways are not our ways. It is not cowardice that drives them to these tactics, but rather tradition. Yet still, their valour is as alien to me as the disgusting savagery of the orks.

It is difficult to hold my tongue. I wish him to leave before honesty stains the deeds we have achieved together, and before truth spoken too brutally threatens the alliance between our respective Chapters.

‘My brothers and I came to this city without the illuminating guidance of our Chaplain. We would offer reverent thanks if you would lead us in prayer before we quit the city and rejoin our Chapter by the shores of the Hemlock.’

‘I know little of your Chapter’s cult and creed, Salamander.’

‘We know this, Reclusiarch. Still, we would offer sincere thanks.’

It is a magnificent and bold gesture, and I know it honours me far more than it would honour them if I agreed. To lead brothers from another Chapter in prayer is beyond merely rare. It is almost unheard of. In my life, I can recall only one such instance, and that was with our gene-brothers and fellow sons of Dorn, the Crimson Fists, when the Declates system burned.

‘Think of the battle last night,’ I tell him. ‘Think of the rooftop battle in the

Nergal district. There was one moment in the chaos that still preys upon my mind. It casts a shadow over us now, like an enemy's spear threatening to fall.'

He hesitates. This is clearly not the way he thought his request would be answered. 'What aspect of the battle troubles you, Reclusiarch?'

A fine question.

The beast falls from my hands, its skull broken, to die at my feet.

I hear the burning hiss of Priamus's blade tearing through alien flesh. I hear the strained snarls of meat-clogged chainblades. I hear the yelling of panicked humans as they cower in the storm shelter, their fear reaching my senses through the armour-plated walls.

Another creature snarls in my face, spitting thick saliva over my faceplate. It dies as Artarion's bolter kicks once from a few metres away, shearing its malformed head off in a burst of gore.

'Focus,' he grunts over the vox.

I return the favour a moment later, my maul pounding into a beast that sought to leap at him from behind.

The battle is close, down to pistols, blades and the crashing beat of fists into faces. In the centre of the expansive plaza, the thickly-armoured storm shelter endures siege from close to two hundred of the enemy.

Footing is treacherous. Our boots are stamping down on pools of cooling blood and the bodies of dead dockworkers. The Salamanders are…

Curse them all…

Priamus blocked a cut from the closest ork, the beast's chopping sword deflected with a shower of sparks from the brief blade contact.

He killed it with the riposte – an ugly strike he felt no pride for, slipping past the creature's non-existent guard and ramming the blade's point into the beast's exposed neck.

The brute's axe slammed with clanging force against the side of his helm. His vision receptors showed angry static for two seconds.

Not deep enough. The swordsman yanked back with the blade, and on the second plunge he hilted it in the ork's collarbone. The beast collapsed in a heap of dead limbs.

Priamus resisted the urge to laugh.

The next ork to leap at him came with two of its brothers. The first fell to Priamus's blade lashing out to carve through its torso, the energised blade going through meat and bone like soft clay. The second and third would have had a fair chance at overpowering him, had they not been battered to the ground by a sweep of the Reclusiarch's maul.

'Where are the Salamanders?' he voxed, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

'They're holding.'

'They're what?'

Bastilan's fist vibrated with the crashing judder of his bolter. Streaks of alien blood painted his battered armour yet again.

Recriminations spilled out over the vox. The Salamanders weren't advancing with the Templars. The Templars were pushing ahead too far, too fast.

'Follow us, in the name of the Throne!' Bastilan added his voice to the vox-chatter.

'Fall back,' came the staid voice of Sergeant V'reth. 'Fall back to the eastern platform and be ready to engage the second wave.'

'Advance! If we strike now, there will be no second wave. We're at the warlord's throat!'

'Salamanders,' V'reth spoke calmly, 'Hold and be ready. Cut down any stragglers that seek to breach the shelter.'

Bastilan kicked a hunched alien in the chest, breaking whatever passed for its rib structure. In the moment's respite, he ejected his spent bolt magazine and slammed a fresh one home.

They were advancing unsupported, away from the shelter, in pursuit of the fleeing orks. Ahead, through the crowd of panicking beasts, Bastilan could see the armoured warlord of this wretched tribe, its staggering gait made all the more pronounced by the ablative armour plating that seemed surgically bolted to its nerveless flesh.

Bolts slashed after the retreating warleader, roaring from the muzzles of Templars fighting their way through a bestial and ferocious rearguard. Several shells detonated against the creature's armour, while others smacked into the backs and shoulders of fleeing orks around their commander.

‘He’s getting away,’ Bastilan grunted. The words shamed him even to speak them.

‘Fall back,’ came the Reclusiarch’s growl.

‘Sir,’ Bastilan began, coupled with Priamus’s decidedly more annoyed ‘No!’

‘Fall back. This is not worth dying over. We do not have the numbers to spill the warlord’s blood now.’

V’reth, to his credit, nods.

‘I see. You consider this a stain on your personal honour.’

He does not see. ‘No, brother. I consider it a waste of time, ammunition, and life. Two of your own squad were killed in the successive waves that followed. Brother Kaedus and Brother Madoc from my own force were slain. If we had pursued in unity, we could have broken through to the enemy leader and taken his head. The rest of the beasts would have scattered, and the bulk could easily have been purged by kill-teams in the aftermath.’

‘It is tactically unsound, Reclusiarch. Pursuit would have left the shelter undefended and vulnerable to regrouping waves attacking from other sectors. Three thousand lives were saved by our defiance last night.’

‘There were no attacks from other sectors.’

‘There may have been, had we pursued. And there was still no guarantee we would have overpowered the rearguard quickly enough to reach the warlord.’

‘We weathered six further assaults, wasted seven hours, lost four warriors, and expended a hoard of ammunition that my knights can ill-afford to throw away.’

‘That is one way of seeing the final cost. I see it more simply: we won.’

‘I am finished with this… debate, Salamander.’ Again, I recall the grinding cut of Nero’s medicae-saw, and the puncturing retrieval of cutting tools extracting glistening gene-seed organs from the chests of the slain.

‘It grieves me to hear you speak this way, Reclusiarch.’

Listen to him. So patient. So calm.

So blind.

‘Get out of my city.’

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CHAPTER XIX

FATE

The giant stood above its worshippers in silence.

Its skin and bones were harvested from crashed and salvaged ships, each column, gear, pylon, girder and plate of armour that went into its birth stolen from something else. Although the giant was not alive, living creatures served it in place of blood and organs. They clambered through the god's form, insulated by the armour, hanging from the metal bones, moving like the blood cells in sluggish arteries.

The giant had taken over two thousand labourers over a month to build. It had finally awoken outside the walls of Hive Stygia three days before, to great roars of praise from its devoted faithful.

And then, in its first hours of life, it had wiped the hive city from the face of the planet. Stygia was a modest industrial city, defended by the Steel Legion and its own militia with little in the way of Adeptus Astartes or Mechanicus support. From the moment the giant awoke to the moment the last vestiges of organised Imperial resistance was crushed, the city lasted a total of five hours and thirty-two minutes.

And now, the giant stood silent, idle, making ready for its journey south.

Its face was piggish and round-eyed, all jagged jaw and red-iron tusks. Behind the broken windows that served as its eyes, hunched crewmembers moved in loping gaits, attending to their bestial imitations of Imperial Titan command.

The giant's name, splattered across its ugly, fat-bellied hull in crude alien hieroglyphs, was *Godbreaker*.

With a slow tread that shook the earth around it, *Godbreaker* began to

move south, towards the coast.

Towards Helsreach.

If it could remain mobile without breaking down – a difficult feat given the skills of its creators – it would arrive by dawn the following day.

In a fateful sense of opposed unity with the *Godbreaker*, another powerful war machine drew nearer to Helsreach. Its journey was a far longer one, and its progress was a melancholy fraction of what it might have been in a better age.

Waves of ashy soil blew aside in the land train's wake, as its gravity suppression field exerted its influence on the ground below the rattling, serpentine vehicle. Jurisian felt its resistance in every touch upon its controls. The soul of the machine was rising from its slumber now, finding itself disrespected and on the edge of lashing out at the living being responsible.

'Reclusiarch,' he spoke into the vox again, once more receiving no answer.

Oberon's existence in his mind was akin to a beast alone in the woods. Jurisian could keep it at bay as long as he focused on its presence, just as a traveller could face down a wolf in the wild if he kept watch for the beast and carried a torch of flame to ward it away. It was a game of focus, and despite his weariness, the Master of the Forge possessed focus in abundance. He was a conscientious and patient soul, devoted to each of his tasks like a predator hunting prey. This demeanour and dedication, coupled with his ability and deeds of honour, had seen him promoted to his rank aboard the *Eternal Crusader* nineteen years before.

Jurisian had been present at Grimaldus's induction into the inner circle, and though it shamed him to admit it now – even silently, even only to himself and the lurking soul of the war machine – he had cast his vote against the Chaplain ascending to Mordred's role as Reclusiarch.

'He is not ready,' Jurisian had said, adding his voice to Champion Bayard's. 'He is a master of small engagements, and a warrior beyond peer. But he is not a leader of the Chapter.'

'The Forgemaster speaks the truth, High Marshal,' Bayard had added. 'Grimaldus is flawed by hesitation. A second's delay in all he does, and it is no secret why. He holds himself to his master's standards. Doubt clings to him, darkening his place in the Chapter.'

‘He is shaken by Mordred’s death,’ Jurisian had pressed. ‘He seeks his place in the Eternal Crusade.’

Helbrecht had sat musing on his throne, his cold eyes lowering the temperature of the room.

‘In the coming war, I will give him the chance to find that place.’

Jurisian had spoken no more, and inclined his head in a bow. The Emperor’s Champion was not so subdued, and had put forward his recommendations for warriors other than Grimaldus to succeed Mordred.

The High Marshal had kept his own counsel, but the voices of the Sword Brethren around Helbrecht’s dais sounded out in jeers as fists crashed against shields. Grimaldus was the chosen of Mordred the Avenger, and skilled in personal combat beyond question. Two centuries of valour and glory; two hundred years of unrelenting courage and a host of enemy dead across a horde of worlds; his short years as the youngest Sword Brother in the history of the Chapter – there was no arguing with such truths.

Jurisian and Bayard had relented. The following night, they watched Grimaldus accept Mordred’s mantle.

Oberon tilted as it rose over an ash dune, the anti-grav field changing its tone to a more strained whine.

On the horizon, a blanket of blackness rose from a burning city.

‘Reclusiarch,’ he voxed, trying once more to speak with the warrior that did not deserve the title he now carried.

Leaving the Titan had proved less of a trial than Asavan had feared.

He’d managed it two days ago, and had been on the streets of the city ever since. All it had taken was a slow descent through the decks, and what felt like about eight million spiral staircases, each one shaped from dense bronze and riveted heavily to the walls.

Well. Perhaps closer to four staircases. But by the time Asavan was approaching ground level, he was blinking sweat from his eyes and cursing his lack of fitness. On the Titan’s lower levels, all was emergency red lighting, narrow corridors, and stuffy air filled with the smell of sacred incense holy to the Machine-God, as well as His disciples chanting blessings in His name. Through their devotion was *Stormherald* empowered. Praise be.

‘Halt,’ a machine-voice barked, and Asavan did exactly as he was told. He

even raised his hands in the air, mimicking some unnecessary surrender. ‘What are you doing here?’ the voice demanded.

Here was at the base of the Titan’s pelvis, in one of the lowest accessible chambers, lit by a flickering yellow siren light. Six augmented skitarii stood stationed around a bulkhead in the floor. The room itself rocked back and forth, tilting with the Titan’s tread.

‘I’m leaving the Titan,’ the priest said.

The skitarii glanced at each other with focus lenses instead of eyes. The air buzzed with inter-vox communication. They were confused. This… this made no sense.

‘You are leaving the Titan,’ one of them, apparently their leader, said. His eye lenses revolved, scanning the unaugmented human.

‘Yes.’

More vox-chatter. The leader, his face noticeably more bionic than the others’, emitted a blurt of machine code. Asavan knew an error/abort complaint when he heard one.

‘*Stormherald* is engaged in locomotive activity.’

Asavan was aware of this. The entire room was, after all, moving. ‘The Titan is walking. I know. I still wish to leave. This service maintenance ladder will take me down the left leg struts to the shin-fortress, will it not?’

‘It would,’ the skitarii leader allowed.

‘Then please excuse me. I must be going.’

‘Halt.’ Asavan did, again, but he was growing tired of this. ‘You wish to leave the Titan,’ the skitarii repeated. ‘But… why?’

This was hardly the ideal setting for a debate on crises of faith and the sudden revelatory desire to walk among the city’s people and help them with one’s own hands.

Asavan reached for the medallion around his neck, marking him as an honoured member of the Ecclesiarchy of Terra and a minister ordained to preach the word of the Emperor in His aspect as the Machine-God of Mars.

The skitarii stared at the icon for several moments – the double-headed eagle and the divided skull backing it – and lowered their weapons.

‘My thanks,’ the sweating priest said. ‘Now if it’s not too much trouble, could you open that bulkhead for me?’

His stomach lurched at the sight beyond the opened trapdoor. Beneath, the broken rockcrete of Hel’s Highway passed by, a good twenty-five metres

down. Pudgy hands gripped the black iron service ladder as he descended, rung by rung, through the wind, hanging on to the Titan's thigh. Above him, the bulkhead slammed with a chime of finality.

So be it. Down, he went.

Behind the god-machine's knee, another bulkhead blocked his descent into the bulky lower leg section. Below, Asavan heard the servos of turrets mounted on the shin-walls panning back and forth, seeking targets.

It took almost a full minute to work the bulkhead's wheel lock, but he was energised now, drawing close to his objective. Once more, he descended into red-lit, downward spiralling corridors, avoiding the troop chambers where ranks of skitarii stood in tomb-like silence.

The Titan's movement now was almost unbearable, slamming him to the wall and rocking him from his feet on several occasions. This low, the gravitic stabilisers were little use against the sheer degree of movement necessary for each leg to make. His surroundings rumbled with sickening violence every eleven seconds, as the foot came down on the road below. Asavan vomited against a wall, and tried not to laugh. He was trying to keep his balance while walking through the steel bones in the ankle of a striding machine giant. Perhaps this wasn't such a wonderful idea, after all.

And now came the hardest part.

This last bulkhead opened onto the Titan's tiered claw-toes, which formed steps by which the skitarii battalions in the leg-fortresses could ascend and descend, when *Stormherald* was at rest.

Disembarking with the Titan in motion was going to be… exciting.

Asavan pulled the door open on squealing hinges, gripping a nearby handrail and watching the ground in bug-eyed horror, waiting for it to level out with the foot touching down. It did, with a bone-jarring rumble of thunder, and the fat priest ran, huffing and puffing, down the tiered stairs.

The other foot came down, shaking the ground and sending Asavan tumbling down the last steps to land in a heap of overweight flesh and filthy robes on the dirty surface of the highway.

A metre away, the stairs rose again as the great war machine lifted its foot to take another step. Squealing without even realising he was doing so, Asavan Tortellius sprinted, with his additional chins shaking, away from the leg's ascent and inevitable descent. He hurled himself the last few metres, landing hard.

As the Titan walked on, monstrous feet still pounding into the ground, the priest lay on his back, breathing in ragged gasps.

And thus was completed the least dignified disembarkation from an Imperator Titan in the history of the Imperium.

That had been two days ago.

Since then, Asavan had not improved his situation by a great deal, but by the Throne, he was doing the Emperor's work. And that was a start.

His journey along the Hel's Highway (which he was resolutely calling his 'pilgrimage') had begun on an uninspiring note. Hauling himself to his unsteady feet and recovering the shoe he had lost in his fall, he began to make his way down the wide road, clutching his bag of dehydrated foodstuffs and electrolyte fluid packs.

Away from the Titan, with *Stormherald* thumping away in the far distance now, he realised how utterly silent a dead city could be. The crashing of weapons and war machines was a muted murmur, seeming a world away. His immediate surroundings were quiet almost to the point of eeriness.

He left the highway to trudge through an abandoned commercia district that had been punished heavily weeks before. Slain tanks littered the central market zone, both Imperial and alien, and each one commanding its own mound of nearby bodies. Red flies – the bloated and oversized tropical vermin that bred like a plague in the jungles to the west – were here in swarms, blanketing the dead and feeding from them.

He'd not been prepared for the smell of a city at war. On the back of a Titan, one strode the battlefield like a colossus, far from what the princeps, blessings upon her, referred to as the 'distasteful biological carnage'.

The smell was somewhere between untreated sewage and spoiled food. He vomited again halfway across the plaza, releasing a stringy ooze that stuck to his teeth. Fluid packs and dehydrated foodstuffs were not wonderful for the digestion.

That night, he'd camped in the broken shell of a Leman Russ. The tank was half buried in a fallen wall, which evidently it had rammed. Whatever had become of its crew was a mystery Asavan didn't feel like looking into. He was glad enough that they weren't there, slouched and rotting in their seats like so many others had been.

When he finally slept, he dreamed of everything he'd seen that day. After three hours of dreaming that every corpse he'd passed was staring at him,

he gave up the attempt to find rest and instead pushed on deeper into the city.

On the second day, he had found his first survivors. In the ground floor of a collapsed habitation block, movement drew his eye.

He'd voiced a tremulous 'Hello?' before he'd even realised he might be calling out to one of the invaders. The sound of scampering footsteps emboldened him. Alien beasts would not run from a lone human's cry. 'I've come to help,' he called.

Silence was the only answer.

'I have food,' he tried.

A filthy face rose from behind a pile of rubble. Narrowed eyes never left him – bright and quick like a scavenger's gaze.

'I have food,' Asavan said again, lowering his voice this time. With no sudden movement, he unslung the satchel from his back and held up a dehydrated food pouch in its silver packaging. 'It's dehydrated. Rations. But it's food.'

The face became a person, a middle-aged woman, as she left her hiding place and drew closer. Gaunt and wild-eyed, she moved with the caution of the forever fearful. It took three attempts for her to speak. Before the words left her mouth in a scratchy whisper, she had to clear her throat repeatedly.

'You're a priest?' she asked, still not coming within arm's reach. She pointed at his white and violet robes, her gesture weak and dismissive.

'I am. The God-Emperor sent me to you.'

She had wept in that moment, and soon after, they shared a small meal in the ruins of her hab-chamber. He asked questions of her life, and the losses she'd suffered. Before he left an hour later, he made sure she had several days' worth of food and fluid, and blessed her in the name of the God-Emperor. It was strange to be ministering to the genuinely needy, and the fully-fleshed. So many of his sermons had been to fellow clerics and machine-altered skitarii that a weeping woman praising the Emperor was quite beyond his experience.

It was strange, but it was good. It was worthy.

Asavan Tortellius's first meeting with a survivor had gone well. He walked on, similar encounters repeating themselves over the next day and night. It was only on the third day that he ran into trouble.

A small group of ragged survivors huddled around a trash-fire, warming

their hands as night fell over another tank graveyard along the Hel's Highway. Asavan cleared his throat as he approached, raising a hand in greeting.

The survivors whirled, bringing lasguns to bear. Several of the group were in workers' overalls, blood-spattered and dark with grime. One of them was clad in a Guard uniform, a bulky power pack on his back and a cabled lasrifle aimed at Asavan's face.

'No more surprises, please, yes?' The soldier spat onto the ground, his thin face marked with suspicion. 'I am tired and I am cold and I am sick to my core of shooting looters in the skull.'

'I'm not a looter.'

'That is not a surprise to me, given what I have just said I do to looters.'

'I'm a priest.'

'Explains the robes,' one of the workers chuckled. 'I think he's telling the truth, Andrej.'

'A priest,' the storm trooper repeated.

'A priest,' Asavan nodded.

The storm trooper lowered his rifle. 'That is most definitely a surprise. I am Andrej of the Legion. These are my friends, who were unlucky enough to be born in Helsreach instead of a city worth defending.'

The workers snickered.

'I am Asavan Tortellius, of *Stormherald.*'

'The god-machine?' Andrej barked a laugh. 'You are far from your walking throne, fat priest. Did you fall off and fail to catch up?'

Asavan drew nearer to the fire, and the workers made room for him.

'Tomaz Maghernus.' One of them offered his hand for the priest to shake. 'Don't mind Andrej, sir. He's not all there.'

'All of me is exactly where it needs to be.' The storm trooper shook his head, his dark, weasel eyes glinting with the fire's reflection. 'Throne, I have never been so cold. We are all lucky that our balls have not frozen and cracked by now.'

'Good to see you,' one of the other men muttered to the priest.

'Yeah,' another nodded, his voice sincere despite not meeting the newcomer's eyes. Asavan was touched by their almost-shy gratitude to see a priest amongst all this.

'Looters?' Asavan asked. 'Did I hear that correctly?'

‘You did,’ Maghernus breathed into his hands, before holding them out to the flames. ‘Dockworkers. Militia and Guard deserters. It’s ugly out here. They’re going through the habs, stealing credits and whatever else they can find.’

‘May I ask, why are you out here?’

Andrej shook his head as he joined the group. ‘Do not sound so suspicious, holy man. We are not hiding from duty. We are merely the Forgotten, lost in the dead city, making our way back to… wherever the closest front line might be.’

‘You have no contact with the rest of the Guard?’

‘Ha! I like this. I like the way you think. You fell off your Titan, fat man. Do you have a vox-link back to ask your Mechanicus masters for advice? No. Exactly. You were not at the docks, priest. Half the city died last week. The Guard is broken, and the vox is no more than a hundred frequencies of hissing noise. If I am right, and I hope to be wrong, then no Imperial force is able to contact any other in perhaps half of the city.’

‘What do you intend to do?’

‘We are moving west. The Templars went to the west, and so shall we. Why are *you* here?’

Asavan shrugged. It wasn’t something he could explain with any conviction. ‘I wanted to walk the streets and help where I could. I was serving no one on the back of a Titan.’

A few of the group made the sign of the aquila and murmured their admiration.

‘You wish to come with us, fat priest? You will like what is in the west, I am thinking.’

‘What’s in the west?’ Asavan asked.

‘A great number of burning industrial sectors, too many looters for my innocent heart to consider at this moment in time, and of course, the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.’

‘What is this temple you speak of? A monastery? A cathedral?’

Maghernus shook his head. ‘Both. Neither. It’s a shrine – built by the original colonists who came to Armageddon.’

In his surprise, Asavan almost ordered a servo-skull to take a dictation. ‘You are telling me that the first church ever built in Helsreach still stands? It endured the First War against the daemon armies? It remained unbroken

through the Second War, when the Great Enemy first came to this world?'

'Well… yeah,' Maghernus replied.

This was providence. This was why he had left the Titan, and this was why the God-Emperor had guided him through the city to these men.

Andrej snorted at his questions. 'It is not simply the first church built in Helsreach, my fat friend. It is the first church ever raised in the whole world. When the first settlers prayed to the Emperor, they prayed in the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.'

Asavan felt his hands trembling. 'How do we reach it?'

Andrej gestured to the expansive, raised road in the distance. 'We walk the Hel's Highway. How else?'

Artarion stood away from the others.

The building they occupied had once been a small temple, serving as the spiritual heart of this industrial sector. Now it was a tumbledown ruin, no longer fit to house dawn and dusk prayers for the local workers. In the altar room, Artarion had paused his bored exploration, finding bloodstains on some of the fallen rubble that had buried the floor in broken architecture.

The blood-scent was old, the stains themselves flaking. Whoever was entombed beneath had been dead for days. Artarion breathed in through his helm's filters. Female. Had not bled much after being crushed. Dead for perhaps three days; the delicate scent of decomposition was little more than spice on the air.

He'd removed himself to perform the rites of maintenance on his weapons, as well as to get away from Priamus muttering about the Salamanders.

As he lowered himself to sit on the dead woman's cairn, the knee joint of his armour locked for several seconds. Runic warnings flickered across his visor display. Instead of blanking them, he disengaged his helm's seals, removed it, and breathed in the smell of the fire, ash and brick dust that was all Helsreach had become. The faulty joint crunched back into motion, eliciting a grunt from the knight as he sat.

His bolter, chained to his thigh and mag-locked in place, was starved of ammunition. He had not spoken of this to the others yet, but knew they must surely be approaching similar difficulties. Before the week of bloodshed at the docks, the supplies brought down by the Helsreach Crusade from the *Eternal Crusader* so long ago had been reduced to a

Thunderhawk cargo bay half full of bolts and an almost-empty crate of replacement tooth-tracks for chainswords.

The gunship itself sat cold and silent in the courtyard of a factory complex, almost two kilometres to the west, in a sector of the city still securely in Imperial control.

Artarion examined the bolter's fire-blackened muzzle, turning the weapon over in his hands as he followed the path of winding, once-gold inlaid scriptures etched along the gun's sides. A list of enemies slain, battles won, worlds defended…

In wordless silence, he lowered the bolter again.

'There is nothing to like in them,' Priamus spat as he paced the prayer room. 'They wage war to defend, to preserve. Everything in their way is devoted to maintaining what humanity already has.'

Bastilan was sharpening his combat blade, running a whetstone along the gladius's killing edges. The small chamber was filled with Priamus's crunching bootsteps and the *resssh, resssh* of the whetstone scraping.

'It is flawed,' the swordsman added. 'I mean no offence to them as warriors. But drop podding into the city purely to defend civilians? Madness.'

Resssh, resssh.

'Why do you not answer, brother?'

'I have little to say.' *Resssh, resssh.*

'Do you think ill of me for my beliefs? Bastilan, please, you know I am right.'

'I know you are treading on unstable ground. Do not besmirch the honour of our brother Chapter. The Salamanders shed as much blood as we did this week.'

'That is not the point.'

Resssh, resssh. 'That is where you and I disagree, brother. But you are young. You will learn.'

Priamus didn't bother to hide his disgusted sneer from infecting his voice. 'Do not patronise me, old man. You know of what I speak. You are just quietened by the mounting years and too reserved to say it aloud.'

'I am not that old,' Bastilan laughed. The boy was annoying, but he certainly knew how to drag out a smile or two with his misguided fervour.

‘Do not laugh at me.’

‘Then stop making me laugh. What two Chapters fight the same? What two Chapters wage war according to the same principles? We are all born of different worlds and trained by different masters. Accept the differences and stand with them as allies.’

‘But they are *wrong*.’ Priamus stared at the older warrior in disbelief. How could he be so obtuse? ‘They could have landed anywhere in the city. They could have struck at one of the alien commanders. Instead, they crash down amongst us at the docks to defend the humans.’

‘That is why they came. Do not mistake their compassion for tactical idiocy.’

‘That is my point.’ Priamus resisted the rising urge to draw his blade. There was nothing to cut beyond the air before him, yet he felt a keen need to draw steel. ‘They preserve. They defend. We are Adeptus Astartes, not Imperial Guard. We are the spear thrust to the throat, not the blunt anvil. We are all that remains of the Great Crusade, Bastilan. For ten thousand years, we and we alone have crusaded to bring the Emperor’s worlds into compliance. We do not fight for the people of the Imperium, we fight for the Imperium itself. We attack. We *attack*.’

Resssh, *ressh.* ‘Not here. Not at Helsreach.’

Priamus lowered his head, unwilling to concede the point, despite the fact he knew he was defeated. That bastard Bastilan always did this to him. A few quiet words and he’d puncture all of what Priamus was trying to say. It was far, far beyond annoying.

‘Helsreach is…’ the swordsman’s voice was lower now – less bitter, and somehow less confident. ‘Nothing about this war has felt right.’

Nerovar had also retreated from the others.

But apparently not far enough.

‘Brother,’ came a voice. Grimaldus had returned. Nero acknowledged him with a nod, and returned to his feigned examination of the blistered and burned mural on the temple wall. Scenes of the Emperor watching over Helsreach: a golden god with His radiant visage regarding scenes of great industry below. With the wall ruined by flame and the artwork charred, it now resembled the city outside more than it ever had.

‘How was the command meeting?’

‘A tedious discussion of last stands. In that respect, it was no different from any other time. The Salamanders have withdrawn.’

‘Then perhaps Priamus will cease his complaints.’

‘I doubt that.’

Grimaldus removed his helm. Nerovar watched him as he examined the paintings, seeing the Reclusiarch’s scarred features set in a thoughtful frown.

‘How is the wound?’ Grimaldus asked, his voice both deeper and softer now, unfiltered by helm vox.

‘I will live.’

‘Pain?’

‘Does it matter? I will live.’

The chains binding his weapons to his armour rattled as the Reclusiarch moved across the chamber. Ceramite armour boots thudded on the dusty mosaics, breaking them underfoot. In the centre of the room, Grimaldus looked up at the holed ceiling, where a stained glass dome had once mercifully blocked the view of the polluted sky.

‘I was with Cador,’ he said, staring up into the heavens. ‘I was with him at the end.’

‘I know.’

‘So you will believe me when I say that you could have done nothing for him had you been at our side? He was dead the moment the beast struck him.’

‘I saw the death wound, did I not? You are telling me nothing I do not already know.’

‘Then why do you still mourn his fall? It was a magnificent death, worthy of a vault on board the *Crusader.* He killed nine of the enemy with a broken blade and his bare hands, Nero. Dorn’s blood, if only we could all inscribe such deeds on our armour. Humanity would have cleansed the stars by now.’

‘He will never rest in that vault, and you know it.’

‘That is not worth mourning over. It is just a regrettable truth. Hundreds of our own heroes have fallen and remained unrecovered. You carry Cador’s true legacy. Why is that not enough? I wish to help you, brother, but you are not making it easy.’

‘He trained me. He taught me the blade and bolter. He was a father in

place of the parents I was stolen from.’

Grimaldus had still not looked at the other knight. He watched as an Imperial fighter streaked overhead, and wondered if it was Helius, the heir to Barasath and Jenzen.

‘It is the way of the warrior,’ he said, ‘to outlive the ones that train us. We take their lessons and wield them as weapons against the enemies of Man.’

Nero snorted.

‘Did I say something amusing, Apothecary?’

‘In a way. Hypocrisy is always amusing.’ The Apothecary removed his own helm. As he did so, he could suddenly feel the unwelcome weight of the cryo-sealed gene-seed in his forearm storage pod.

‘Hypocrisy?’ Grimaldus asked, more curious than annoyed.

‘It is not like you to comfort and console, Reclusiarch. Forgive me for saying so.’

‘Why would I need to forgive you for speaking the truth?’

‘You make it sound so clear and easy. None of us have been truthful with you since… we came here.’

Grimaldus lowered his gaze from the dark skies. He fixed his eyes – eyes that the commander of a god-machine had called kind, of all things – on Nerovar’s own.

‘You say “Since we came here”. I sense another lie.’

‘Very well. Since before we came here. Since Mordred died. It is difficult to be near you, Reclusiarch. You are withdrawn when you should be inspiring. You are distant when you would once have been wrathful. I believe you are wrong to lecture me on Cador’s death when you have been lost to us since Mordred fell. There are flashes of fire beneath the cold surface, and we have warned you of these changes before. But to no avail.’

Grimaldus chuckled, the sound leaving his lips as a soft exhalation through a reluctant smile.

‘I am seeing the world through his eyes,’ he said, looking down at the silver skull mask in his hands. ‘And I am seeing, night after night, that I am not him. I did not deserve this honour. I am no leader of men, nor am I skilled at dealing with the humans. I should not be wearing the mantle of a Reclusiarch, yet I was certain once the war began, my doubts and discomforts would fade away.’

‘But they have not.’

‘No. They have not. I will die on this world.’ Grimaldus looked at the Apothecary again. ‘My master died, and mere days later, I was consigned to die on a world that has no hope of surviving an ugly war, far from my brothers and the Chapter I have served for two centuries. Even if we win, what does victory buy? We will be kings astride a ruined world of dead industry.’ He shook his head. ‘And this is where we will die. A worthless death.’

‘It is glorious, in its own way. The Helsreach Crusade. Our brothers and the people of this world will remember our sacrifice forever. You know this as well as I.’

‘Oh, I know it. I cannot escape it. But I do not care for *glory.* Glory is earned through a life lived in service to the Throne. It should not be a consolation gift, or something sought to sate a hunger. I want my life to matter to my brothers, and I want my death to further the cause of the Imperium. Do you not recall Mordred’s last words to me? They are written in gold upon the plinth of the statue that honours him.’

‘I remember them, Reclusiarch. “*We are judged in life for the evil we destroy*”. And we will be judged well, for a great many have fallen before us already.’

‘Our deaths inspire no one. They benefit no one. Do you recall the Shadow Wolves? When we saw the last of that Chapter die, I felt my heart sing. Never before had I craved the taste of alien blood as I did in that moment. Their deaths mattered. Every warrior clad in silver armour died in true glory that day. What of Helsreach? Who will draw courage from a footnote in the archives of a fallen city?’

Grimaldus closed his eyes. He did not open them again, even as he heard Nerovar approaching. The fist crashing against his jaw knocked him to the ground, where he at last looked back at the Apothecary. Grimaldus was smiling, though in truth he had not expected the blow.

‘How dare you?’ Nero asked, his teeth clenched and his fist still tight. ‘*How dare you?* You throw filth on our glory here, yet you dare tell me Cador’s death means something? It means *nothing.* He died as we will all die: unremembered and unburied. You are my Reclusiarch, Grimaldus. Do not lie to me. If our glory matters to no one, then Cador’s death is meaningless and I have every right to mourn him as you mourn for all of us.’

The Chaplain licked his lips, tasting the chemical-rich blood that marked them. In silence, he rose to his feet. Nerovar did not back away. Far from it, he stood his ground, and activated his bracer-mounted storage pod. A plastek vial slid from its secure housing, and Nerovar threw it to Grimaldus.

The Reclusiarch caught it in hands that threatened to shake. NACLIDES, the script on the vial denoted. The gene-seed of a brother fallen days before.

'Nero…'

Nerovar ejected another tube and tossed it to the Reclusiarch. DARGRAVIAN, it read. He had been the first to fall.

'Nerovar…'

The Apothecary ejected a third vial. This one he held in his fist, his gauntlet clutching it just shy of crushing it into shards. CADOR showed between Nero's fingers.

'Answer me,' the Apothecary demanded. 'Is what we do here worthless? Is there nothing to be proud of in our sacrifice?'

Grimaldus didn't answer for several moments. He looked around the modest, broken temple, the light of thought bright in his eyes.

'The city is falling, brother. Sarren and the other humans faced that fact today. The time has come for us to choose where we will die.'

'Then let it be where we will be remembered.' Nerovar reverently handed the vial bearing Cador's cryogenically frozen gene-seed organs to the Chaplain. 'Let it be where our deaths will matter, and give birth to tales worthy of being recorded in humanity's history.'

Grimaldus looked at the three vials resting in his gauntleted palm.

'I know of a place,' he said softly, a dangerous flicker appearing in his eyes as he looked back up at his battle-brother. 'It is far from here, but there is no holier place on this entire world. There, we shall dig our graves, and there, we will ensure the Great Enemy forever remembers the name of the Black Templars.'

'Tell me why you have chosen this place. I must know.'

The truth is… surprising, but as I speak the words, there is no doubt within them. This is what we must do, and it is how we must die. Our lives are sacrifice, from implantation of the gene-seed to its extraction from our bodies.

'We will die where our deaths matter. Where we can spite the enemy with

our last breaths, and inspire the warriors of this city.’

‘Now those,’ Nero says, ‘are at last the words of a Reclusiarch.’

‘I am a slow learner,’ I confess. This brings a smile to my brother’s lips.

‘Mordred is dead,’ Nero said, keeping his voice low. ‘But he trusted you as his heir above any other for one reason. He believed you were worthy.’

I say nothing.

‘Do not die without ever living up to him, Grimaldus.’

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CHAPTER XX

GODBREAKER

Maralin moved across the botanical garden, her fingertips trailing along the dewy leaves and petals of the rosebushes.

They were not hers, but that didn't stop her admiring them. Only one of her sisters had the patience and skill to grow roses in the choking air and sickened soil of the city, and that was Alana. All other blooms in the botanical garden were raised by cultivation servitors, and in Maralin's opinion, it showed. Her fingers danced along the wet petals of the soot-darkened roses, amazed as always at how lovelier and fuller Alana's flowers were in comparison to the modest blooms grown by the augmented slave workers.

They lacked inspiration, clearly, and no doubt the severance of their souls had much to do with it.

Passing through the spacious garden, she entered the rectory. The building's air filters were straining, keeping the main chamber cooled. Prioress Sindal was sat, as she almost always was, at her oversized desk of rare stonewood, scribing away in meticulous handwriting.

She looked up as Maralin entered, peering through the corrective eyelenses that had slipped to the end of her nose.

'Prioress, we've received word from Tempestora.'

Sindal's cataracted eyes narrowed, and she gently sprinkled sand across her parchment, drying the fresh ink. She was seventy-one years old, and she didn't just look it – she also sounded it when she spoke.

'What of the Sanctorum?'

'Gone,' Maralin swallowed.

‘Survivors?’

‘Few, and most are wounded. The hive has fallen, and the Sanctorum of the Order of Our Martyred Lady is overrun by the enemy. We received word now that there aren’t enough survivors to retake their Sanctorum as of yet. Our own sisters in the Ash and Fire Wastes are moving to support.’

‘So Tempestora is gone. What of Hive Stygia to the north?’

‘Still no word, prioress. They are surely enduring the siege as we are.’

The old woman’s hands were palsied, though she found that writing always steadied them for reasons beyond her understanding. They shook now as she set the completed parchment aside, on a loose pile of several others.

‘Helsreach has weeks left, but little beyond that. The siege is almost at our own gates.’

‘That… brings me to the second of the morning’s messages, prioress.’ Maralin swallowed again. She was clearly uncomfortable, and resented being the one sent to deliver these messages, but she was the youngest, and often relegated to these tasks.

‘Speak, sister.’

‘We received a message from the Adeptus Astartes commander in the city. The Reclusiarch. He sends word that his knights are en route to stand with us in the defence.’

The prioress removed her eyeglasses and cleaned them with a soft cloth. Then, carefully, she placed them back onto her face and looked directly at the young girl.

‘The Reclusiarch is bringing the Black Templars here?’

‘Yes, prioress.’

‘Hmph. Did he happen to say why he felt the sudden wish to fight alongside the Order of the Argent Shroud?’

He had not, but Maralin had been paying close attention to the scraps of information that made it over the vox with any clarity. This, too, was one of her duties as the youngest, while her sisters were preparing for battle.

‘No, prioress. I suspect it ties into Colonel Sarren’s decision to break up the remaining defenders into separate bastions. The Reclusiarch has chosen the temple.’

‘I see. I doubt he asked permission.’

Maralin smiled. The prioress had fought with the Emperor’s Chosen

before, and many of her sermons had included irritated mentions of their brash attitudes. ‘No, prioress. He didn’t.’

‘Typical Adeptus Astartes. Hmph. When do they arrive?’

‘Before sunset, mistress.’

‘Very well. Anything more?’

There was little. The compromised vox-network had offered several suggestions of severe enemy Titan movement to the north, but confirmation wasn’t forthcoming. Maralin relayed this, but she could tell the prioress’s mind was elsewhere. On the Templars, most certainly.

‘Damn it all,’ the old woman muttered as she rose from her chair, placing the quill in the inkpot. ‘Well, don’t just stand there gawping, girl. Prepare my battle armour.’

Maralin’s eyes widened. ‘How long has it been since you wore your armour, prioress?’

‘How old are you, girl?’

‘Fifteen, mistress.’

‘Well, then. Let’s just say you couldn’t wipe your own backside the last time I went to war.’ The old woman’s forehead barely reached Maralin’s chin as she shuffled past. ‘But it’ll be good to deliver a sermon with a bolter in hand again.’

Elsewhere in the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, the sisters were making ready for war. The Order of the Argent Shroud were not in Helsreach in any significant force, their contributions thus far being little more than a series of fighting withdrawals from churches across the city.

Ninety-seven battle-ready sisters manned the temple’s walls and halls, standing guard over several thousand menials, servitors, preachers, lay sisters and acolytes. The temple itself was formed of a central basilica, surrounded by high rockcrete walls bedecked in leering angels and hideous gargoyles staring out at the city beyond. Between the walls and the central building, acre upon acre of graveyard reached out from the basilica in every direction. Thousands of years before, they had been lush garden grounds, grown and tended by the first of Armageddon’s settlers. Those same settlers were buried here, their bones long turned to dust and their gravestones weathered faceless by time. Interred alongside them were generations of their descendants; holy servants of the Imperium; and the respected dead of

Armageddon’s Steel Legions.

No one was buried here now; the graveyard was considered full. Official records numbered the graves around the basilica as nine million, one hundred and eight thousand, four hundred and sixty. Currently, only two people knew this was incorrect, and only one of them cared about the discrepancy.

The first was a servitor who had been a gardener in life, and had devoted several of his living years, before the augmetics had stolen his reason and independence, to counting the graves as he tended the gardens around them. He’d been curious, and it had satisfied him to learn the truth. He kept it to himself, knowing to report it to his superiors might bring down accusations of laxity in his primary duties. He was, after all, a garden-tender and not a stock-counter or cogitator. Three months after he had satisfied himself with the truth, he was found stealing from the temple’s tithe boxes, and sentenced to augmetic reconfiguration.

The second person who knew the truth was Prioress Sindal. She had also counted them herself, over the course of three years. To her, it was a form of meditation; of bringing herself to a state of oneness with the people of Armageddon. She had not been born here, and in her devoted service to the people of this world, she felt her meditative technique was apt enough.

She had, of course, filed amendments to the records, but they were still locked in the bureaucratic cycle. The temple’s cardinal council were notoriously foul at having their staff deal with paperwork.

Most gravestones were stacked close together in clusters of bloodline or fealty, and there was no conformity in the markers – each was a slightly different size, shape, material or angle to those nearby, even in sections where the rows were ordered in neat lines. In other parts of the graveyard district, finding one’s way along a pathway was akin to navigating a labyrinth, with weaving a way between the graves taking a great deal of time.

The Temple of the Emperor Ascendant itself was, by Imperial standards, a thing of haunting and gothic beauty. The spires were ringed by stone angels and depictions of the Emperor’s primarchs as saints. Stained glass windows displayed a riot of colours, showing scenes of the God-Emperor’s Great Crusade to bring the stars into union beneath humanity’s vigilant guidance. Lesser depictions were of the first settlers themselves, their deeds of

survival and construction exaggerated to deific proportion, showing them as the builders of a glorious, perfect world of golden light and marble cathedrals, rather than the industrial planet they had founded in truth.

The Sisters of the Order of the Argent Shroud had not been idle during the months of warfare that ravaged the rest of the city. Lesser shrines in the graveyard were both heavy weapon outposts and chapels to their founder, Saint Silvana. Angular statues of solid silver – each one of the weeping saint in various poses of grief, triumph and contemplation – stood silent watch over turret pods and barricaded gun-nests.

The walls themselves were reinforced in the same way as the city walls, and bore the same ratio of defence turrets per metre. These remained manned by Helsreach militia.

The temple courtyard's great gates were not closed. Despite the protestations of the cardinal council, Prioress Sindal had demanded the doors be kept open until the last possible moment, allowing more and more refugees to enter over the weeks of siege. The basilica's undercroft housed hundreds of families who hadn't been able to enter the subterranean shelters, for reasons of criminal activity, administrative error, or outright bad luck. Bunched together in the gloom, they came up for morning and evening prayer, adding their voices to the singing pleas that reached up to the immaculately-painted ceiling, where the God-Emperor was depicted staring off into the heavens.

The Temple of the Emperor Ascendant was, in short, a fortress.

A fortress filled with refugees, and surrounded by the largest graveyard in the world.

We are the last to arrive.

Twenty-nine of my brothers already await my arrival, with our cargo gunship grounded nearby. It brings our total force to thirty-five, if one was to count Jurisian labouring on the forlorn hope, trying to bring the weapon across the Ash Wastes.

Thirty-five of the hundred that landed in Helsreach five weeks before.

One of those awaiting our arrival is the one warrior I have done all I can to avoid for the last five weeks.

He kneels before the open gates of the temple's compound, his black sword plunged into the marble before him, helmed head lowered in

reverence. As with the Templars around him, almost all evidence of scripture parchment, wax crusader seals and cloth tabard is gone from his armour. I recognise him because of his ancient armour and the dark blade he prays to.

Jurisian himself has worked on that armour, repairing it with reverence each time he has been honoured with the chance to touch it. Before Jurisian, a host of other Masters of the Forge maintained the relic war-plate through the centuries, back to its original forging as a suit of armour for the Imperial Fists Legion.

While our armour shows dull grey wounds under the stripped paint, this knight's war-plate, forged in a time when primarchs walked the galaxy, shows gold beneath the battle damage. The legacy of Dorn's Legion is still there if one knows where to look; between the cracks, revealed by war.

The knight rises, pulling the sword from the marble with no effort at all. His helm turns to face me, and a faceplate that once stared out onto the battlefields of the Horus Heresy regards me with eye lenses the colour of human blood.

He salutes me, sword sheathed on his back and his gauntlets making the sign of the aquila over his battered breastplate. I return the salute, and rarely in my life has the gesture been so heartfelt. I am finally ready to stand before him, and endure the judging stare of those crimson eyes.

'Hail, Reclusiarch,' he says to me.

'Hail, Bayard,' I say to the Emperor's Champion of the Helsreach Crusade.

He watches me, but I know he is not seeing me. He sees Mordred, the knight whose weapon I bear, and whose face I wear.

'My liege.' Priamus comes forward, kneeling before Bayard.

'Priamus,' Bayard vox-laughs. 'Still breathing, I see.'

'Nothing on this world will change that, my liege.'

'Rise, brother. The day will never come that you must kneel before me.' Priamus rises, inclining his head in respect once more before returning to my side. 'Artarion, Bastilan, it is good to see you both. And you, Nero.'

Nerovar makes the sign of the aquila, but says nothing.

'Cador's fall tore at my heart, brother. He and I served in the Sword Brethren together, did you know that?'

'I knew it, my liege. Cador spoke of it often. He was honoured to serve at your side.'

‘The honour was mine. Know that fifty of the enemy died by my blade the day I heard of his passing. Throne, but he was a warrior to quench the fires of the stars themselves. I miss him fiercely, and the Eternal Crusade is poorer without his sword.’

‘You… do great honour to his memory,’ Nero’s voice is choked with emotion.

‘Tell me, brother,’ Bayard’s tone lowers, as if the refugees standing and staring at us outside the great gates have no right to hear of what we speak. ‘I heard his death-wound was in the back. Is this so?’

Nero’s nod comes with reluctance. ‘It is.’

‘I also heard he killed nine of the beasts alone, before succumbing to his wounds.’

‘He did.’

‘Nine. *Nine.* Then he died facing his enemy, as a knight must. Thank you, Nero. You have brought me comfort this day.’

‘I… I…’

‘Welcome, brothers. It has been too long since we stood united.’ There are general murmurs of assent, and Bayard looks to me.

I smile behind my mask.

They rode in the back compartment of a trundling Chimera armoured personnel transport, their backs thumping against the metal walls with each sharp turn. It had been parked on the highway itself, riddled with bullet holes and las-burns, but still very much fuelled and ready to roll. Andrej and the others had dragged the bodies of dead Legionnaires out onto the road, and the storm trooper had forced the dockers to say a short prayer over the corpses before he would, as he put it, ‘steal their ride’.

‘Manners cost nothing,’ he told them. ‘And these men died for your city.’

The troop section in the back of the Chimera was a typical slice of Guard life, smelling of blood, oil and rancid sweat. On creaking benches, Maghernus and his dockers, along with Asavan Tortellius recruited to their cause, sat and waited for Andrej to get them all the way down the Hel’s Highway.

He was not a good driver. They had mentioned this to him, and he professed not to know what they were talking about. Besides, he’d added, the left tank tread was damaged. That was why he kept skidding.

Also, he'd amended last of all, they should shut up. So there.

Andrej cycled through vox-channels, still getting no luck on any frequency. Whether every vox-tower in the city was gone or the orks had some intense jamming campaign going on was beside the point at this stage. He couldn't get in touch with his commanders, and that left him to his own devices. As always, he would *go forward.* It was the way of the Legion, and the creed of the Guard.

The way he saw it, the Reclusiarch owed him a favour. In this case, *going forward* meant making a stand with the black knights until he could find someone, anyone, from his command structure.

There'd been a particularly galling moment when he'd managed to contact elements of the 233rd Steel Legion Armoured Division, but they were in the middle of being annihilated by an enemy scrap-Titan formation and had no time for pleasantries. Fate was laughing at him, Andrej was sure of it – the one Imperial force he'd been able to reach were minutes from being wiped out anyway.

This was no way to fight a war. No communication between any forces? Madness!

Smoke and flames were on the horizon ahead, but that indicated next to nothing of any use in determining direction or destination. Smoke and flames were on every horizon. Smoke and flame was all each of the horizons had become.

Andrej was not laughing. This did not amuse him, no sir.

He changed gear with a nauseating grind of metal hating metal. A chorus of complaints jeered from the back as the Chimera juddered in protest and shook his passengers around some more. He heard someone's head clang off the interior wall. He hoped it was the fat priest's.

Andrej sniggered. At least that was funny.

'…ckr… sn… tl…' declared the vox.

Aha! Now this was progress.

'This is Trooper Andrej, of the–'

He closed his mouth as the transmission crackled into a semblance of clarity. The burning district ahead, through which he'd need to pass to reach the distant temple… It was the Rostorik Ironworks. The vox told of a Titan's death-wails.

'Hold on,' he called back, and accelerated the battered transport along the

Hel’s Highway, towards the emerging shape of *Stormherald* above the surrounding industrial towers.

The link was savaged by *Bound in Blood*’s mortis-cry. Zarha twisted in her coffin, trying to filter the empathic pain from the influx of sensory information she needed to focus on.

Her fistless arm pushed forward in the milky fluid, and the Titan obeyed her furious need.

‘Firing,’ Valian Carsomir confirmed.

In the centre of the industrial sector, ringed by burning towers and crushed manufactories, the Imperator Titan weathered a hail of enemy fire from scrap-walkers that barely reached its waist. Its shields rippled with searing intensity, corona-bright and almost blinding.

The plasma annihilator amassed power, sucking in a storm of air through its coolant vanes and juddering as it made ready to release. Around the god-machine’s legs, the waddling ork walkers blared sirens and howling warnings to one another. Burning vapour clouded around the shaking plasma weapon as it vented pressure, and with a roar that shattered every remaining window in a kilometre-wide radius, *Stormherald* fired.

Three of the lesser scrap-Titans were engulfed in the flood of boiling plasma that surged from the weapon, melting to sludge in the white-hot sunfire.

Zarha’s arm was aflame with sympathetic agony. She did her best to blank it from her mind, focusing instead on the rattling crawl of insects over her body. Her shields were taking grave damage now. *Stormherald* could not linger here for much longer.

‘*Bound in Blood* isn’t rising, my princeps.’

Zarha knew this. She’d heard its soul scream across the Legio’s princeps-level link.

He is dying.

‘He is dying.’

‘Orders, my princeps?’

Stand. Fight.

‘Stand. Fight.’

The Titan shuddered as another wreck-walker staggered closer, its shoulder cannons booming. Standing above the downed Reaver-class Titan

Bound in Blood, *Stormherald* returned fire with its incidental weapon batteries, flash-frying the lesser machine's void shields in a hail of incendiary fire.

Zarha pushed her other arm forward through the ooze, laughing as she moved. *Stormherald*'s other arm, the colossal hellstorm cannon, thrummed as its internal mechanics chambers and drive engines cycled up to firing speed.

'My princeps…' Lonn and Carsomir warned in the same breath. Zarha cackled in her tomb of fluid.

Die!

'Die!'

The enemy scrap-Titan was shredded by five energy lances blasting from *Stormherald*'s hellstorm cannon. In less than three seconds, its plasma core was breached and critically venting, and in less than five it had exploded, taking the bulk of the fat-bodied gargant with it. Shrapnel shards the size of tanks hammered off the Imperator's void shields, leaving distortions of bruising while the generators struggled to compensate.

'Secondary impact from the turbolaser batteries… Cog's teeth, we struck the G-71 orbital landing platform. My princeps, I implore you to use caution…'

Engine kill. She licked her cold, wrinkled lips. *Engine kill.*

'Engine kill.'

Half a kilometre behind the dead enemy walker – its foundation struts destroyed by the laser salvo from *Stormherald*'s hellstorm cannon – a sizeable landing platform crashed down to the ground, sliding on fouled gantries to smash through the roof of a burning tank manufactorum. An avalanche of rockcrete, broken iron and steel was all that remained of both installations, at the heart of a cloud of grey-black smoke and rock dust.

The ironyard had played host to the pitched battle between Titans and infantry for several days. Little was left, yet neither side was giving ground.

'My princeps…'

No more lectures. I do not care.

'No more lectures. I do not care.'

'My princeps,' Valian repeated, 'new contact. Behind us.'

She spun in the fluid, fish-like and alert. *Stormherald* followed with ponderous slowness, its fortress-legs thudding down onto the ground. The

cityscape view through the Titan’s eyes panned, showing nothing but devastation.

‘The scanner blur is either several walkers together, or a single engine of our size.’

The adept hunched by the auspex console turned to regard the pilot crew with three bionic eyes, each with a lens of dark green glass. A blurt of machine-code disagreed with Lonn’s appraisal.

[]Negative. Thermal signature registers distinct single pulse.[]

One enemy engine.

That isn’t possible, she thought, but never let it reach her vocalisers. An uneasy tremor was running through the Titan’s bones, and she felt it as keenly as she’d once felt the wind on her skin in another lifetime.

‘My princeps, we must disengage,’ Lonn said, staring out into the burning ironyard. ‘We need to rearm and cool the plasma core in standard sustained venting procedure.’

I know that better than you, Lonn.

‘I know that better than you, Lonn.’

But I am not abandoning a district I have spent four nights fighting to hold.

‘But I am not abandoning a district I have spent four nights fighting to hold.’

‘My princeps, there’s precious little left standing to defend,’ Lonn pressed. ‘I repeat my recommendation to withdraw and rearm.’

No. I am sending Regal *and* Ivory Fang *north to hunt the inbound enemy engine and confirm with visual scanning.*

‘No. I am sending Regal **and** Ivory Fang **north to hunt the inbound enemy engine and confirm with visual scanning.’**

Lonn and Carsomir shared a glance from across the command deck. Both men were restrained in their control thrones, and both men wore the same expression of frustrated doubt.

‘My princeps,’ Carsomir tried, but he was cut off.

‘See? They move.’ On the hololithic display screen, the runes denoting the scout Titans *Regal* and *Ivory Fang* broke away from their perimeter-stalking patrol to the west, and strode northwards in search of the incoming thermal pulse.

‘My princeps, we do not have the ammunition reserves required to inflict

destruction-level damage on an enemy engine of comparable size to us.’

‘I am venting the heart-core’s excess fusion matter and flushing the heat exchangers.’ Even as she vocalised the orders, she was sending empathic pulses through her links to make it so.

‘My princeps, that is not enough.’

‘He is right, my princeps,’ Carsomir had turned in his throne, and was looking back at her fluid tank now. ‘You are too close to *Stormherald*’s wrath. Return to us and focus.’

‘We are defended by three Reavers and our own scout screen. Be silent.’

‘Two Reavers, my princeps.’

Yes. Two. She pulled back from the immersion of rage. Yes… two. *Bound in Blood* was silent and dead, its power core cooling and its princeps voiceless. In her confused thinking, she did not mean to vocalise her next words.

‘We have lost seven engines in one week of battle.’

‘Yes, my princeps. Prudence would serve us best now. If the auspex is true, we must withdraw.’

She floated in her coffin, hearing the curious humanity in their voices. Such emotion. Such curious intensity, affecting their speech tones. She recognised it as fear, without truly recalling what the sensation felt like.

‘We have killed almost twenty of the foe’s engines… but I concede. Sound the withdrawal as soon as the Warhounds have confirmation.’

The first Imperial engine to bear witness to the *Godbreaker* was *Ivory Fang*. It stalked fast and low on its backwards-jointed legs, the side-to-side pitch of its stomping gait adding a feral, if mechanical, grace to its dawn hunt.

Warhound-class. And it suited the name, lone wolfing its way through the wrecked industrial sector, striding around the shells of tanks destroyed in the week-long struggle for the Rostorik Ironyard. Sometimes, its hooved feet would crunch down on the soft meat of burned bodies and render them into pulped smears along the ground. Dead skitarii, Guardsmen, factorum workers and greenskins littered the district.

Ivory Fang was commanded most ably by a princeps by the name of Haven Havelock. Princeps Havelock dreamed, as did most of his ilk, of one

day mastering a great battle-Titan, and perhaps even one of Invigilata's precious few Imperators. His fellow princeps – equals and superiors alike – spoke well of him, and he knew his place in the Legio as a solid, reliable scout-Titan commander was assured, valued, and deserved.

Patience was foremost among his virtues – patience and cunning. That reasoned, meticulous hunting instinct bled through the mind-bond into *Ivory Fang.* Twinned, man and machine were past masters at the kind of deep-urban stalks where Warhound Titans most excelled.

The rough link between Titan commanders maintained throughout the city had suffered just as Imperial vox had suffered, but Havelock was reassured by the fragments of meaning that pulsed through the chaos. If there truly was an enemy scrap-Titan out there, it was nothing the battle group could not deal with. *Stormherald* was no more than two kilometres to the south, and with it were *Danol's Retribution* and *The Ghoul,* both Reavers with victory banners descending from their armour plating that would put mid-range Titan princeps from any other Legio to shame.

Nothing the beasts could hurl at them would break such a formation. Even the largest gargant would fall to *Stormherald.*

I see nothing, came the aggravated spurt of machine code from his fellow princeps, Feerna of *Regal.*

Havelock spent a quarter of a second consulting his internal tracking runes. The link to his Titan's auspex sensors formed a rough, instinctive knowledge of his kin's locations in his mind.

Regal was a half-kilometre to the north-east, moving at speed through a small cluster of iron smelteries. It would have been in visual range, had the space between the two Titans not been obstructed by ruined manufactories.

I see nothing, either.

It's the heat, she complained. *Hunting for thermal signatures in this inferno is like seeking black in the night sky. My auspex readers show nothing but thermal disruption. Horus himself could be hiding in here, and I would not kn–*

Feerna? Feerna?

'Registering energy discharge of significant size to the north-east,' Havelock's moderati called out.

'Confirmed,' murmured the tech-adept that hunched in a station behind the princeps throne.

Feerna? Havelock tried once more. ‘Bring us about and move north-east at aggressive intent speed. Everyone be ready.’ He twitched in his restraint throne as the Titan obeyed his pilot’s urgings. The connection feeds were alive with subtle static, itching at his nerves. *Ivory Fang* was keen. It had sensed something.

And then it hit Havelock, too.

‘Hnnngh,’ he drooled through clenched teeth, shuddering against the leather bindings that restrained him in place. ‘Hnn… Hvv…’

The pain of *Regal*’s mortis-cry faded, and Havelock breathed again. Feerna was gone, as was her Titan. She’d been a Warhound, and her link to the others was tenuous and weak in comparison to the strength of a bond to the greater god-machines. The pain bled away fast, bringing relief in its wake.

The Titan clanked its way down a subsidiary alley, its weapon-arms rising in readiness. Havelock sent several mental urgings in quick succession, triggering autoloaders, coolant valves and bracing pistons into activity. *Ivory Fang* rounded the corner at the alley’s end, stalking out into the main street. As it had been since this morning, this sector was still aflame because of the destroyed refineries and petrochemical stores, with about half the buildings finally quieting into smouldering ruins.

But the fighting was done here.

‘Where is the bastard?’ Havelock whispered.

The auspex chimed – once, weak.

‘We have movement,’ the tech-adept grumbled, not looking up from his scanner console. ‘There is–’

‘I see, it, I see it. Back away *now!*’

It came from the black clouds, rumbling forward on a clumsy mess of tank treads and crushing feet. Its body was slanted, tapering to a head that was all brutal jaw and piggish, alien eye-windows. Every metre of its scrap metal torso bristled with tiered weapons platforms.

It was quite the ugliest and most offensive thing Havelock had ever seen, and that was more than simply because it was an affront to the purity of Mechanicus god-machine creation. No, more than that, it offended him because its manifestation before him made no sense. It… dwarfed *Stormherald.*

It seemed impossibility given form, striding, limping from the oily smoke

that blanketed the district.

Havelock pulsed a digitally-translated pict of the enemy gargant across the mind-bond to Princeps Zarha and any other Titan commander in range. It was all the warning he would be allowed to send, for *Godbreaker* opened fire the very moment its main armaments cleared the smoke.

Ivory Fang was pulverised beneath enough solid, laser and plasma weapon fire to level a city block. Its demise, and the end of Havelock's mediocre career, was marked by a vast crater that would remain for decades after the war had bled the whole world almost dry.

Godbreaker moved onwards.

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CHAPTER XXI

STORMHERALD DOWN

The two engines faced one another across the burning ironyard, as alike in power as they were unlike in dignity. Both were ablaze, both bleeding fire and smoke into the clouded air.

The air between them was a blizzard of weapon fire as secondary turrets and battlement guns spat anti-infantry firepower at each other in the hopes of inflicting as much damage as possible. Inside both Titans, it sounded like a flood of pebbles clattering against the armour-plated hulls.

Inside *Stormherald*, the sirens were wailing long and loud.

Zarha writhed in her fluid-filled tomb, her limbs pushing through the blood-pinked water. Psychostigmata was ravaging her, as *Stormherald*'s wounds played out in a map across her naked body. Where the Titan was battered, she was discoloured by bruising or bent by broken bones. Where the god-machine was rent and torn, her flesh smiled and bled in open wounds. Where *Stormherald* burned, she was haemorrhaging internally.

The Titan's command deck smelled of burning oil and rancid sweat.

'Primary shield layer restored,' Carsomir announced, his hands working at his console with a near-furious focus. 'Core containment holding.'

Raise… raise shields…

'Krrrsssshhhhh.'

RAISE THE SHIELDS.

'Raise the shields.'

'Already done, my princeps.'

She was slowing down. The pain stole so much of her attention now. With a moan that was swallowed into silence by the water, she pulsed orders to

the various decks and pushed both of her arms forward through the pinkish ooze.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, screaming into the oxygen-rich fluid, the stumps of her hands thumping against the front of her coffin.

Nothing.

‘Plasma annihilator venting for sixteen more seconds, my princeps. Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve.’

Fire the… the… other arm. Fire it.

‘Krrrssssshh.’

FIRE THE HELLSTORM CANNON. Her stunted right limb thudded over and over against the glass side of her amniotic tank.

‘Fire the hellstorm cannon.’

‘As soon as it has recharged, my princeps,’ Lonn replied, half-ignoring her now. She’d given the order to fire at will several minutes before. Drifting in her pain as the Titan fell to pieces, she was barely trustworthy now. Carsomir and Lonn worked almost independently of their princeps’s wishes. They only had one more shot at walking away from this – the enemy Titan was already advancing over the mangled body of *The Ghoul*, which had lasted less than a minute beneath the *Godbreaker*’s initial volleys.

The scrap-Titan was capable of a merciless amount of firepower. None of *Stormherald*’s command crew had seen anything like it before, let alone suffered on the receiving end. Only a few minutes into the god-machines’ duel, and the Imperator was wreathed in flame, temperature gauges whining and warning lights flashing throughout the confined corridors threading through the giant’s steel bones.

The multitude of layered energy screens that served the Titan as void shields had been torn apart with insane, laughable speed by the ork walker.

‘I’m ready,’ Carsomir announced. ‘Firing.’

‘Wait for the stabilisers to come back online!’ Lonn yelled. ‘They only need another minute.’

Carsomir thought his fellow pilot’s faith in the tech-crews working in the shoulder joints was admirable, but unbelievably misguided given the circumstances. He blinked once, wasting precious seconds to even think about listening to Lonn’s plea.

‘The arm isn’t badly damaged. I’m taking the shot. I can make it.’

‘You’ll miss, Val! Give them thirty seconds, just thirty more seconds.’

‘Firing.’

‘You son of a bitch!’

Stormherald’s knees locked in preparation and the plasma annihilator tower that served as its left arm began its air-sucking inhalation of coolant.

‘You’ve killed us,’ Lonn breathed, watching the enemy Titan through the steamed-up view windows. An unremitting torrent of incidental fire rained against *Stormherald*’s shields, turning them violet with strain.

‘Void shields buckling,’ one of the tech-adepts called from a side terminal.

‘Enemy engine making ready to fire primary weapons,’ another said.

‘They’ll never get the chance…’ Valian Carsomir smiled with a wicked light in his eyes.

Lonn’s shouted protest was drowned out in the roar of discharging sunfire. A beam of plasma – roiling, boiling and white-hot – vomited from the cannon’s focusing ring, blasting across the four hundred metres separating the two Titans. *Stormherald* stood rigid, defensive, no longer advancing after the first two minutes of punishing exchange. *Godbreaker* had not stopped its thunderous, slow charge.

‘You bastard!’ Lonn yelled. Carsomir had missed. The jet of plasma blanketed the ground to the left of the closing ork gargant, where it began to dissolve everything it touched in a vast pool of acidic corruption.

Lonn had been right. The arm-weapon had strayed despite targeting locks, as the supreme force of its own firepower sent it veering off-centre.

‘I had the shot,’ Carsomir shook his head.

‘Void shields failing,’ the tech-adept announced without any emotion whatsoever.

‘I had the shot,’ Carsomir repeated, unable to look away from the wreck-Titan bearing down upon them. Behind the moderati thrones, Zarha floated in her suspension tank, slack and unconscious.

‘No, no, no…’ Lonn worked at his console, his brow furrowed. ‘This can’t be.’

The Titan began to shudder around them as the void shields died again, the Imperator’s dense armour taking the brunt of the alien attack.

Lonn had never worked like this before in his life. It was a flurry of effort, performed half in the flesh and half with the mind. He could feel the Titan

falling into slumber, and its dimming consciousness dragged at his thoughts, slowing them to a crawl. Where he met resistance like this in the mind-link, he compensated by overrides on his command console.

The command deck grew dark as he worked. The enemy gargant eclipsed all outside light, looming before the idle *Stormherald.*

‘Why hasn’t it fired?’ Carsomir worked as Lonn did, cooling essential systems, ordering repair teams to afflicted joints, feeding power from the coughing shield generators to the thirsty weapon energy cells.

To Lonn, the reason was obvious. Like the savages that acted as the gargant’s puppeteers, the scrap-Titan was built to kill with its hands. Several of the thing’s weapon mounts were taken up by crude arms that ended in spears and claws of salvaged metal. It wanted to savour *Stormherald*’s death, like some many-armed daemon from the impure millennia of pre-Imperial Terra.

Zarha’s augmetic eyes flicked back to active as the chamber grew dark. She awoke, seeing the doom bearing down on her, feeling secondary fire devastating her armour plating like she was being skinned alive.

Through the bloody fluid and maddening pain, she raised her shivering arms. *Stormherald* mirrored the gesture as it was pummelled under *Godbreaker*’s guns. Jagged metal fell from the Mechanicus giant like rainfall, ripped from its body and crashing to the ground below. Many of the Imperator’s crew that had the sense of self-preservation to flee were killed by the falling chunks of armour plating.

Zarha put the last of her strength, and the last of her life, into throwing both her arms forward. The plasma annihilator did not fire. Neither did the hellstorm cannon. Both were locked in the time-consuming process of recharging from depleted power generators.

Both towering weapon-arms speared forward, hammering through the fat hull of *Godbreaker* and impaling it in place. The cry of tearing scrap metal was cacophonous as *Stormherald*’s cannons pushed deeper, stabbing like daggers through meat, seeking to grind and crush the enemy’s heart-reactor.

Grimaldus. I stood until the end, as promised. Awaken Oberon. *Awaken it, or die as we have.*

Perhaps her thoughts echoed across the empathic link to her moderati, for one of them voiced something of her sentiments.

‘We’re dead,’ Carsomir murmured. He wanted to rise from his throne, but

the restraints and connection cables bound him too completely. He settled for closing his eyes.

Lonn had sensed the Crone's intent. He leaned all his weight on the control levers, adding his demands to Zarha's, plunging the arms deeper into the enemy Titan's chest with scraping, grinding slowness. He felt sick to stare up through the darkened viewports to see the bestial, tusked aliens clambering along the impaling arm-cannons, using them as bridges to board *Stormherald* as they bled from the wounds in their own Titan's body.

With no peaceful fade or foreshadowing, the power died, leaving him in darkness. He eased up on the levers, knowing without needing to look that the Crone was gone.

Stormherald was a statue, joined to the war machine that was slowly carving it to pieces with great chops of its bladed limbs. As endings went, Lonn mused, this was neither grand nor glorious.

As the command deck shook with rhythmic violence from the *pound, pound, pounding* of *Godbreaker*'s many weapon-arms, Lonn drew his laspistol, and watched the sealed doors, ready for the aliens to eventually breach them. His skin crawled at the gentle sound of Zarha's corpse bumping against the glass front of her coffin, in time to the Titan's shaking.

'I… I had the shot,' Carsomir stammered from the adjacent throne as he waited to die in the dark. 'I had the shot…'

The side of his head burst open as a las-beam slashed through his skull.

'You bastard,' Lonn said to the twitching body. Then he lowered his pistol, took a deep breath, and began the laborious process of disengaging himself from the control throne.

There was something human in the way *Stormherald* died. The way it went slack, the way it staggered, the way it crashed to the ground, its heart-core cold, swarming with enemy bodies like insects feeding upon a corpse.

The god-machine shook the earth when it finally toppled. The spined, spiked cathedral tumbled from its back in a spillage of priceless architecture, left as no more than rubble and scraps of armour plating in a mountain of wreckage by the Titan's head. *Stormherald*'s arms were wrenched from the torso, squealing free of the ruptured shoulder joints when the ancient engine hammered into the ground with enough force to send tremors through the entire city.

The head itself was torn free before the main body fell, leaving a socket of trailing power cables and interface feeds, like a nest of a million snakes. Gripped in the lifter-claw at the end of one of *Godbreaker*'s many arms, the Titan's head was clamped and crushed, then hurled aside as a twisted ball of scrap metal. Its landing flattened a small manufactorum, as the armoured command chamber weighing several dozen tonnes blasted through the building's side wall and pulverised several support pillars.

On board *Godbreaker*, the bestial creature in charge ranted at its subordinates for destroying and discarding the Titan's head in such a way. To the beast's mind, it would have made a very impressive trophy to mount on their own god-machine.

The few Legio crew members, skitarii defenders and tech-adepts that survived *Stormherald*'s fall scrabbled from exits and breaks in the behemoth's skin. In the midday light of Armageddon's weak sun, they were cut down by the ork reavers around the dead Titan.

Miraculously, Moderati Secundus Lonn was one of these. He had managed to break free of the bindings and interface cables linking him to the dying god-machine, and make it out of the bridge by the time *Godbreaker* decapitated *Stormherald*. In the following fall, he broke his leg in two places, earned a concussion as the tilting corridor sent him falling down a flight of spiral stairs, and busted several of his teeth clear out of his gums when his head smacked off a handrail.

On hands and knees, dragging his dead leg and half drunk with concussion, Lonn hauled himself out of an emergency bulkhead to lie on the warm armour plating of *Stormherald*'s torso. There he remained, panting and bleeding in the thin sunlight for several seconds, before starting to crawl his slow way down to the ground. He was killed less than a minute later by the marauding greenskins swarming over the downed Titan.

Through the pain, he was laughing as he died.

Grimaldus came at last to the inner sanctum.

He was no longer a warrior here, but a pilgrim. Of this he was certain, though in the wake of his words with Nero, he felt certain of little else.

It had taken very little time within the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant to bring about this certainty within him, but the feeling was undeniable. He felt home, on familiar and sacred ground, for the first time since he had left

the *Eternal Crusader.*

It was purifying.

The cool air didn't taste of fire and blood on a world he had no wish to walk upon. The silence wasn't broken by the drumbeat of a war he had no stake in.

Augmented infants – the lobotomised bodies of children kept eternally young through gene manipulation and hormone control – were enhanced by simple Mechanicus organs and pressed into service as winged cherub-servitors, hovering on anti-grav fields as they trailed prayer banners through the halls and arched chambers.

In the myriad rooms of the basilica, the devoted and the faithful of Helsreach went about their daily reverence despite the war blackening their city. Grimaldus walked through a chamber of monks offering prayer through inscribing hundreds of saints' names on thin parchments that would hang from the weapons of temple guards. One of the holy men kneeled as the Adeptus Astartes passed, imploring the 'Angel of Death' to wear the parchment on his armour. Touched by the man's devotion, the knight had accepted, and voxed an order to the rest of his men scattered throughout the temple grounds to acquiesce to any similar charity.

Grimaldus let the lay brother tie the scroll to his pauldron with twine. The offered parchment was a modest but appreciated replacement for the iconography, oathpapers and heraldry that had been scoured from his armour in the last five weeks of battle.

The Reclusiarch had ventured alone into the undercroft, wishing to bear witness to the civilians there in his patrol to examine all defences and locations within the basilica. The subterranean expanse might once have been austere and solemn, featuring little more than infrequently-spaced sarcophagi of black stone. To the knight's eyes, it was a refugee bunker, packed tight with humans that smelled both unwashed and afraid as they sat around in family clusters – some asleep; some speaking quietly; some comforting crying babies; some spreading out meagre possessions on dirty blankets, taking stock of everything they now owned in the world, which was all they had managed to carry with them as they'd fled their homes.

Wordlessly, he'd walked among them. Every one of them had moved from his path; every one of them so openly awed by their first sighting of an Adeptus Astartes warrior. Parents whispered to children, and children

whispered more questions back.

‘Hello,’ a voice called from behind him as he was moving back up the wide marble stairs. The Reclusiarch turned. A girl-child stood at the bottom of the staircase, clad in an oversized shirt that clearly belonged to a parent or older sibling. Her ratty blonde hair was so dirty that it snarled quite naturally into accidental dreadlocks.

Grimaldus descended again, ignoring the girl’s parents hissing at her, calling her back. She was no older than seven or eight. She stood up straight, and reached his knee.

‘Hail,’ he said to her. The crowd flinched back from the vox-voice, and several of those closest gasped in a breath.

The girl blinked. ‘Father says you are a hero. Are you a hero?’

Grimaldus’s gaze flicked across the crowd. His targeting cursor danced from face to face, seeking her parents.

Nothing in two centuries of war had prepared him to answer this question. The gathered refugees looked on in silence.

‘There are many heroes here,’ the Chaplain replied.

‘You are very loud,’ the girl complained.

‘I am more used to shouting,’ the knight lowered his voice. ‘Do you require something from me?’

‘Will you save us?’

He looked at the crowd again, and chose his words with great care.

That had been an hour ago. The Reclusiarch stood with his closest brothers-and the Emperor’s Champion in the basilica’s inner sanctum.

The chamber was expansive, easily able to accommodate a thousand worshippers at once. For now, it stood bare, the hundreds of Steel Legionnaires that were bunking here in recent weeks currently out on their patrols through the graveyard and surrounding temple district.

The few dozen that had been off-duty were ushered out by monks when the Adeptus Astartes had entered. Almost immediately, the knights were joined by a new presence. An irritated presence, at that.

‘Well, well, well,’ the irritated presence said in her old woman’s voice. ‘The Emperor’s Chosen, come to stand with us at last.’

The knights turned in the sunlit chamber, back to the entrance where a diminutive figure stood in contoured power armour. A bolter, cased in

bronze with gold-leaf etchings, was mag-locked between her shoulders. The gun was a smaller calibre than Adeptus Astartes weaponry, but still a rare firearm to see in the possession of a human.

Her white power armour was bedecked in trappings that marked her rank in the Holy Order of the Argent Shroud. The old woman's white hair was cut severely at her chin, framing a wrinkled face with icy eyes.

'Hail, prioress,' Bayard acknowledged her with a bow, as did the others. Grimaldus and Priamus made no obeisance, with the swordsman remaining unmoving and Grimaldus instead making the sign of the aquila.

'I am Prioress Sindal, and in the name of Saint Silvana, I bid you welcome to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.'

Grimaldus stepped forward. 'Reclusiarch Grimaldus of the Black Templars. I cannot help but notice that you do not sound welcoming.'

'Should I be? Half of the Temple District has already fallen in the last week. Where were you then, hmm?'

Priamus laughed. 'We were at the docks, you ungrateful little harpy.'

'Be at ease,' Grimaldus warned. Priamus replied with a vox-click of acknowledgement.

'We were, as my brother Priamus explained, engaged in the east of the hive. But we are here now, when the war is at its darkest, as the enemy approach the temple doors.'

'I have fought with Adeptus Astartes before,' the prioress said, her armoured arms crossed over the fleur-de-lys symbol that marked her sculpted breastplate. 'I have fought alongside warriors who would have given their lives for the Imperium's ideals, and warriors that cared only for accruing glory, as if they could wear their honour like armour. Both breeds were Adeptus Astartes.'

'We are not here to be lectured on the state of our souls,' Grimaldus tried to keep the irritation from his voice.

'Whether you are or not doesn't matter, Reclusiarch. Will you dismiss your fellow warriors from the chamber, please? There is much to speak of.'

'We can speak of the temple's defence in front of my brothers.'

'Indeed we can, and when the time comes to speak of such things, they will be present. For now, please dismiss them.'

'Did you cleanse yourself, by the Stoup of Elucidation?'

This is the question she asks in the silence that descends once my brothers are gone, and the doors are closed.

The stoup she speaks of is a huge bowl of black iron, mounted upon a low pedestal of what looks like wrought gold. It stands by the double doors, which are themselves bedecked in imagery of warlike angels with toothed swords, and saints bearing bolters.

I confess to her that I did not.

'Come then.' She beckons me to the bowl. The water within reflects the painted ceiling and the stained glass windows above – a riot of colour in a liquid mirror.

She dips a bare finger into the water after taking the time to detach and remove her gauntlets. 'This water is thrice-blessed,' she says, tracing her dripping fingertip across her forehead in a crescent moon. 'It brings clarity of purpose, when anointed onto the doubting and the lost.'

'I am not lost,' I lie, and she smiles at the words.

'I did not mean to imply that you were, Reclusiarch. But many who come here are.'

'Why did you wish to speak with me alone? Time is short. The war will reach these walls in a matter of days. Preparations must be made.'

She speaks, staring down into the perfect reflection offered by the bowl. 'This basilica is a bastion. A castle. We can defend it for weeks, when the enemy finally gathers courage enough to besiege it.'

'Answer the question.' This time, I could not keep the irritation from my voice even if I had wished to.

'Because you are not like your brothers.'

I know that when she looks at my face, she does not see me. She sees the death mask of the Emperor, the skull helm of an Adeptus Astartes Reclusiarch, the crimson eye lenses of humanity's chosen. And yet our gazes meet in the water's reflection, and I cannot completely fight the feeling she is seeing *me*, beneath the mask and the masquerade.

What does she mean by those words? That she senses my doubts? That they drip from me like nervous sweat, visible and stinking to all who stand near me?

'I am no different from them.'

'Of course you are. You are a Chaplain, are you not? A Reclusiarch. A keeper of your Chapter's lore, soul, traditions and purity.'

My heart rate slows again. My rank. That is all she meant.

‘I see.’

‘I am given to understand Adeptus Astartes Chaplains are invested with their authority by the Ecclesiarchy?’

Ah. She seeks common ground. Good luck to her in this doomed endeavour. She is a warrior of the Imperial Creed, and an officer in the Church of the God-Emperor.

I am not.

‘The Ecclesiarchy of Terra supports our ancient rites, and the authority of every Chapter’s Reclusiam to train warrior-priests to guide the souls of its battle-brothers. They do not invest us with power. They recognise we already hold it.’

‘And you are given a gift by the Ecclesiarchy? A rosarius?’

‘Yes.’

‘May I see yours?’

The few Adeptus Astartes singled out for ascension into the Reclusiam are gifted with a rosarius medallion upon succeeding in the first trials of Chaplainhood. My talisman was beaten bronze and red iron, shaped into a heraldic cross.

‘I no longer carry one.’

She looks up at me, as if the reflection of my skull visage was no longer clear enough for her purposes.

‘Why is that?’

‘It was lost. Destroyed in battle.’

‘Is that not a dark omen?’

‘I am still alive three years after its destruction. I still do the Emperor’s work, and still follow the word of Dorn even after its loss. The omen cannot be that dark.’

She looks at me for some time. I am used to humans staring at me in awkward silence; used to their attempts to watch without betraying that they are watching. But this direct stare is something else, and it takes a moment to realise why.

‘You are judging me.’

‘Yes, I am. Remove your helm, please.’

‘Tell me why I should.’ My voice is not pitched to petulance, merely curiosity. I had not expected her to ask such a thing.

‘Because I would like to look upon the face of the man I am speaking with, and because I wish to anoint you with the Waters of Elucidation.’

I could refuse. Of course I could refuse.

But I do not.

‘A moment, please.’ I disengage my helm’s seals, and breathe in my first taste of the crisp, cool air within the temple. The fresh water before me. The sweat of the refugees. The scorched ceramite of my armour.

‘You have beautiful eyes,’ she tells me. ‘Innocent, but cautious. The eyes of a child, or a new father. Seeing the world around you as if for the first time. Kneel, if you would? I cannot reach all the way up there.’

I do not kneel. She is not my liege lord, and to abase myself in such a way would violate all decorum. Instead, I lower my head, bringing my face closer to her. The joints of her pristine armour give the smooth purr of clean mechanics as she reaches up. I feel her fingertip draw a cross upon my forehead in cold water.

‘There,’ she says, refastening her gauntlets. ‘May you find the answers you seek in this house of the God-Emperor. You are blessed, and may tread the sacred floor of the inner sanctum without guilt.’

She is already moving away, her milky eyes squinting. ‘Come. I have something to show you.’

The prioress leads me to the centre of the chamber, where a stone table holds an open book. Four columns of polished marble rise at the table’s cardinal points, all the way to the ceiling. Upon one of the columns hangs a tattered banner unlike any I have ever seen before.

‘Hold.’

‘What is it? Ah, the first archive.’ She gestures to the sheets of ragged cloth hanging from the war banner poles. Each once-white, now-grey sheet shows a list of names in faded ink.

Names, professions, husbands and wives and children…

‘These are the first colonists.’

‘Yes, Reclusiarch.’

‘The settlers of Helsreach. The founders. This is their charter?’

‘It is. From when the great hive was no more than a village by the shore of the Tempest Ocean. These are the men and women that laid the temple’s first foundations.’

I let my gloved hand come close to the humming stasis field shielding the

ancient cloth document. Parchment would have been a rare luxury to the first colonists, with the jungle and its trees so far from here. It stands to reason they would have recorded their achievements on cloth paper.

Thousands of years ago, Imperial peasants walked the ashen soil here and laid the first stone bones of what would become a great basilica to house the devotions of an entire city. Deeds remembered throughout the millennia, with their evidence for all to see.

‘You seem pensive,’ she tells me.

‘What is the book?’

‘The log from a vessel called the *Truth’s Tenacity.* It was the colonisation seeding ship that brought the settlers to Helsreach. The four pillars house a void shield generator system, protecting the tome. This is the Major Altar. Sermons are given here, among the city’s most precious relics.’

I look at the tome’s curled, age-browned pages. Then at the archive banner once more.

Last of all, I replace my helm, coating my senses in the selective vision of targeting sights and filtered sounds.

‘You have my thanks, prioress. I appreciate what you have shown me here.’

‘Am I to expect any more of your kind arriving to bolster us, Adeptus Astartes?’

I think, for a moment, of Jurisian, bringing the Ordinatus Armageddon overland, uncrewed, at minimal power and of little to no use once it arrives.

‘One more. He returns to join us and fight by our sides.’

‘Then I bid you welcome to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, Reclusiarch. How do you plan to defend this holy place?’

‘We are past the point of retreat now, Sindal. No finesse, no tactics, no long speeches to rally the faint of heart and those that fear the end. I plan to kill until I am killed, because that is all that remains for us here.’

Both the Reclusiarch and the prioress turned at the pounding upon the door.

Grimaldus blink-clicked the rune to bring his vox channels live again, but it wasn’t any of his brothers seeking his attention.

Prioress Sindal waved her hand in a magnanimous gesture, as if there were a crowd to impress. ‘Do come in.’

The great metal-wrought doors rumbled open on clean but heavy hinges.

Eight men stood framed by the doors and the austere corridor beyond. Each of them bore a filthy share of blood, mud, soot and oil stains. They carried lasguns with the practiced ease of men who had become utterly familiar with the weapons, and all but two of them wore dirty blue dockworkers' overalls. One of those that did not was dressed in the robes of a priest, but not the cream and blue weave of the temple's own residents. He was from off-world.

The leader of the group raised his goggles, letting them clack back on the top of his helmet. He regarded the knight with wide eyes.

'They said you would be here,' the storm trooper said. 'I beg the many forgivings of this holy place for my intrusion, but I bring news, yes? Do not be angry. The vox is still playing many unamusing games and I could not speak with anyone in any other way.'

'Speak, Legionnaire,' said Grimaldus.

'The beasts, they are coming in great force. Many are not far behind us, and I have heard vox-chatter that Invigilata is leaving the city.'

'Why would they leave us?' the prioress asked, horrified.

'They would quit the city at once,' Grimaldus admitted, 'if Princeps Zarha was gone. Mechanicus politics.'

'She is gone, Reclusiarch,' Andrej finished. 'An hour ago, we saw *Stormherald* die.'

Behind the Guardsman, a warrior-maiden in the white power armour of the Order of the Argent Shroud caught her breath, staring at the prioress with her features flushed.

'Prioress!'

'Take a breath, Sister Maralin.'

'We've received word from the 101st Steel Legion! Invigilata's Titans are abandoning Helsreach!'

Andrej looked at the newcomer as if she had announced that gravity was a myth. He shook his head slowly, a deep and solemn pity written across his face.

'You are late, little girl.'

The first wave to break against the walls was not a horde of the enemy.

Close-range vox detected them first, with reports of elements from three Steel Legion regiments engaged in panicked retreat. Grimaldus responded

with the temple's vox-systems, boosted far beyond what the squad-to-squad comms systems were currently capable of.

He gave the order to any Helsreach forces receiving the message to fall back to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, abandoning any further struggle to hold the few remaining sectors in the Ecclesiarchy District. Several lieutenants and captains sent affirmative responses in reply, including a captain of the hive militia still leading over a hundred men.

The fleeing Imperials began to arrive less than an hour later.

Grimaldus stood with Bayard at the gates, looking out into the city. A dark-hulled Baneblade command tank rolled past, guided into the graveyard sector by a platoon of Guardsmen waving directions to the driver. Behind it, a cadre of Leman Russ battle tanks with various turret weapons trundled in loose formation. Mingling between the rolling armour and trailing behind were several hundred Legionnaires, ochre-clad and visibly weary. Wounded were being stretchered by their fellows in serious numbers, and there were plenty of wails and moans calling out over the grind of tank engines.

Two soldiers passed by the watching knights, bearing the writhing body of a junior officer on a cloth stretcher. The man had lost an arm and a leg, at the elbow and knee respectively. His face was a contorted mess of whatever he really looked like, his visage ruined by the pain flowing through him.

One of the stretcher-bearers nodded to Grimaldus as he passed, and muttered a respectful 'Reclusiarch.'

The Templar nodded back.

'Fought with them?' Bayard asked over the vox.

'Desert Vultures. I was with them when the first walls fell. Good men, all.'

'Very few left,' Bayard said, a strange edge to his voice.

Grimaldus turned his skulled face to the Champion. 'There will be enough. Have faith in your brothers' blades, Bayard.'

'I have faith. I am sanguine with my fate, Chaplain.'

'My rank is Reclusiarch. Use it.'

'By your will, brother, of course. But we stand vigil over the city's death with a handful of bleeding humans, Reclusiarch. I am sanguine, but I am also a realist.'

Grimaldus's vox-snarl drew stares from the soldiers passing nearby. 'Have faith in the people of this city, Champion. Such condescension is beneath

you. We are the last guardians of the relics prized by the first of Armageddon's colonists. These people are fighting for more than their homes and lives. They are fighting for their ancestors' honour, on the holiest ground in the entire world. The survivors of this war across the globe will take heart from sacrifices made by the thousands destined to die here. Blood of Dorn, Bayard… the Imperium was *born* in moments such as this.'

The Emperor's Champion watched him for a long moment, during which Grimaldus found his heart thumping faster. He was angry, and feeling the anger rise was as purgative as his time within the temple's serene halls. Bayard spoke, his voice sincere despite the crackle of vox-breakage.

'My voice was one of the few that spoke against your ascension to Mordred's rank.'

Grimaldus snorted, returning to watching the arriving forces. 'I would have said the same in your place.'

Seventy soldiers of the Steel Legion 101st came together in a battered convoy of Chimera transports. The ramp slammed down as the lead vehicle pulled up to a halt. A squad of Legionnaires disembarked, not a one of them free of bloodstains or bandaging.

'Leave the Chimeras outside,' Major Ryken ordered the others. Half of his face was wrapped in grubby cloth bandages, and he leaned heavily on an aide's shoulder, limping as he walked.

'Shouldn't we take them inside?' Cyria Tyro asked. She looked back over her shoulder at the tanks being abandoned.

'To hell with them,' Ryken spat blood as she led him to the two knights. 'Not enough ammunition in the turrets to make it worthwhile.'

'Grimaldus,' she said, looking up at the towering warrior.

'Hail, Adjutant Quintus Tyro. Major Ryken.'

'We got cut off from Sarren and the others. The 34th, the 101st, the 51st… They're all in the central manufactory sectors…'

'It does not matter.'

'What?'

'It does not matter,' Grimaldus repeated. 'We are defending the last points of light in Helsreach. Fate brought you to the temple. Fate sent Sarren elsewhere.'

'Throne, there are still thousands of the bastards out there.' He spat pinkish

spit again, and Tyro grunted as she took more of his weight. ‘And that’s not the worst of it.’

‘Explain.’

‘Invigilata has gone,’ Tyro said. ‘They left us to die. The enemy still has Titans – and there’s one that you’ll never believe until you look upon it with your own eyes. We saw it march from the Rostorik Ironworks, collapsing habitation towers in its wake.’

‘The 34th Armoured rolled out to stop it,’ Ryken winced as he spoke. His bandages were growing more stained, around what was likely an empty eye socket. ‘It flattened most of them in the time it takes a desert jackal to howl at the full moon.’

A curious local expression. Grimaldus nodded, catching the meaning, but Ryken had more to add.

‘*Stormherald* is down.’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘This *Godbreaker*… It killed the Crone, and slew *Stormherald*.’

‘I know.’

‘You know? So where’s the damn Ordinatus? We need it! Nothing else will kill that gigantic clanking… thing.’

‘It is coming. Move inside and see to your wounds. If the end is coming to these walls, you will need to stand ready.’

‘Oh, we’ll all be ready. The bastards took my face, and that made it personal.’

As they moved away, Grimaldus heard Tyro gently teasing the major for his bravado. When they were beyond the gates but still in sight, the Reclusiarch saw the general’s adjutant kiss the major on his unbandaged cheek.

‘Madness,’ the knight whispered.

‘Reclusiarch?’ Bayard asked.

‘Humans,’ Grimaldus replied, his voice soft. ‘They are a mystery to me.’

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CHAPTER XXII

EMPEROR ASCENDANT

At last, vox reports began to trickle through to the defenders gathered in the temple's graveyard district. Across Helsreach, Sarren's plan, the 'one hundred bastions of light', was in effect, with Imperial forces massing in defensive formations around the most vital parts of the city.

Contact was erratic at best, but the fact it even existed was a boost to morale. Every point of focused defence was holding well, with all divisions breaking down between storm troopers, Guard infantry, Steel Legion armour units, militia and armed civilians who chose to take to the streets rather than cower in their shelters.

The city was fighting to keep its heart beating, and the orks no longer found themselves advancing against a mobile wave of human resistance. Now the aliens were breaking against a multitude of last stands, hurling themselves against defenders that had nowhere left to run.

Fortunately for the Imperials, enemy scrap-Titans were few in number. With recent engagements such as the Battle of the Rostorik Ironworks, the greenskins' complement of god-machines had suffered furious losses in the face of Legio Invigilata's wrath.

Even as Invigilata recalled its last remaining Titans from the city in the wake of *Stormherald*'s death, the Titans were forced to fight their way free of the orks flooding through Helsreach's unprotected streets. Although several Titans escaped through the broken walls and into the Ash Wastes beyond, the Warlord-class engine *Ironsworn* was brought down by a massed infantry assault in an ambush similar to the one that had laid *Stormherald* low all those weeks before.

The last of the Imperial Navy forces in the city had based themselves at the Azal spaceport, where they continued to mount bombing runs and offer limited air support to the tank battalions ringing the Jaega District's surface shelters. The fighting here was among the thickest and fiercest seen in the entire siege to date, and the archives which would catalogue the Third War for Armageddon came to consider many of the glorious propaganda falsehoods born here as cold fact. Many of these heroic twists of the truth were due to the writings of one Commissar Falkov, whose memoir, entitled simply '*I Was There…*', would become standard reading for all officers of the Steel Legions in the years after the war.

Although there was absolutely no truth in the tale, Imperial records would state that acting-Commander Helius sacrificed his own life by ramming his Lightning into the heart-reactor of the enemy gargant classified as *Blood Defyla*. The truth was rather more mundane – like Barasath before him, Helius was shot down and torn to pieces shortly after disentangling from his grav-chute on the ground.

The presence of *Godbreaker* was a bane to any Imperial resolve nearby. Although the god-machine appeared a shadow of its former self, bearing a legion of wounds and missing limbs from its death-duel with *Stormherald*, with Invigilata marching away across the badlands the defenders of Helsreach had little in the way of firepower capable of retaliating against the gargant.

After laying waste to the Abraxas Foundry Complex, the mighty enemy engine adopted a random patrol of the city, engaging Imperial forces wherever it chanced upon them.

Imperial records would state that while the Siege of the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant was entering its second day, the alien war machine *Godbreaker* was destroyed on its way to finish the temple defenders once and for all.

This, at least, was perfectly true.

Jurisian watched the mechanical giants stride from the city, stepping through its sundered walls. There were three – the first escapees of Legio Invigilata – and the Master of the Forge stared from the quiet confines of *Oberon*'s command module as the Titans left the burning city behind.

The first was a Reaver-class, a mid-range battle Titan that appeared to

have sustained significant damage if the columns of smoke rising from its back were any indication. Its flanking allies were both Warhounds, their ungainly gait rocking their torsos and arm-cannons side to side, step by step across the sands.

The wastelands outside Helsreach's walls resembled nothing more than a graveyard. Thousands of dead orks lay rotting in the weak sun: killed in Barasath's initial attack runs or slaughtered in the inevitable inter-tribal battles that arose when these bestial aliens gathered.

Ruined tanks were scattered in abundance, as was the wreckage from countless propeller-driven planes, each one made out of scrap and reduced back to it. The orks' landing vessels stood abandoned, with every xenos capable of lifting an axe now waging war inside the city. The primitive creatures were here to fight and destroy, or fight and die. They cared nothing for what fate befell their vessels left in the desert. Such forethought and consideration was beyond the mental capacity of most greenskins.

Jurisian made no attempt to hide his presence. There would be little point in making the attempt, for he knew the approaching Titans would be able to read *Oberon*'s energy shadow on their powerful auspex scanners. So he waited, all systems active, as the Invigilata Titans drew near. The ground began to shiver with their closing tread, which Jurisian noted by the twisted metal and bodies across the desert floor shaking in rhythm with the god-machines.

The wounded Reaver came to a halt, its immense joints protesting that it was still forced to remain standing. It was damaged enough that a second's focus-drift might see the princeps losing control over the engine's stabilisers. It slowly aimed its remaining weapon arm at the command module, and Jurisian looked up into the yawning maw of a gatling blaster cannon.

With *Oberon*'s shields up, the Master of the Forge would have estimated the Ordinatus could tolerate several minutes of sustained assault even from a weapon as destructive as this Reaver's main armament. But *Oberon* had no shields. They were one of many secondary systems that Jurisian had lacked the time, expertise and manpower necessary to reengage.

He knew what a gatling blaster was capable of. He'd seen them devastate regiments of tanks, and rip the faces and limbs from enemy Titans. *Oberon*'s armour plating would last no more than a handful of seconds.

The Titan stared down at him in silence, no doubt while the princeps decided how to deal with this unbelievable blasphemy. Hunchbacked and striding with arm-cannons raised in threatening salute, the two Warhounds circled the immobile Ordinatus. Their posturing amused the Forgemaster. How they played at being wolves.

'Hail,' he said into a broad range of vox-channels. In truth, he was growing bored of the silence. He was far, far from intimidated.

'*What blasphemy is this?*' crackled the reply through the command module's internal speakers. '*What heretic dares defile* Oberon*'s deserved slumber?*'

Jurisian leaned back in the control throne, elbows on the armrests and his gloved fingers steepled before his helmed face.

'I am Jurisian of the Black Templars, Master of the Forge aboard the *Eternal Crusader,* and trained by the Cult Mechanicus for years on the surface of Mars itself. I am also in possession of the Ordinatus Armageddon, after subduing its defences and reawakening its soul, force-binding it to my will. And, lastly, I am summoned to Helsreach to aid wherever I am able. Aid me, or stand aside.'

The delay was significant in duration, and in other circumstances, that would have made it insulting. Jurisian suspected his words were being transmitted to all nearby princeps, almost definitely summoning them to this position.

Half a kilometre away, another Reaver Titan was breaching the city walls, emerging into the Ash Wastes. The knight watched it begin its halting stride in this direction, noting that it was relatively undamaged.

'*You are blaspheming against the Machine-God and its servants.*'

'I am wielding a weapon of war in defence of an Imperial city. Now aid me, or stand aside.'

'*Leave the Ordinatus platform, or be destroyed.*'

'You are not about to open fire on this holiest of artefacts, and I am not empowered by my liege lord to comply with your demands. That brings us to a stalemate. Discuss useful terms, or I will take *Oberon* into the city unprotected, surely to be destroyed without significant Mechanicus support.'

'*Your corpse will be removed from the sacred innards of the Ordinatus Armageddon, and all remnants of your presence will be eradicated from*

memory.’

As Jurisian drew breath to offer terms, his vox-link flickered into life. Grimaldus, at last.

‘Reclusiarch. I trust the time has finally come?’

‘We are embattled at the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. How soon can you bring the weapon to us?’

The Master of the Forge looked out of the reinforced windows at the patrolling Titans, then at the city beyond, beneath a smoke-blackened sky. He knew the hive’s layout from studying the hololithics before his exile into the desert.

‘Two hours.’

‘Status of the weapon?’

‘As before. *Oberon* has no void shields, no secondary weapon systems, and suspensor lift capability is limited, hindering speed to a crawl. Alone, I can fire it no more than once every twenty minutes. I need to recharge the fuel cells manually, and regenerate flow from the plasma containment ch–’

‘I will see you in two hours, Jurisian. For Dorn and the Emperor.’

‘By your will, Reclusiarch.’

‘Heed these last words, Forgemaster. Do not bring the weapon too close. The Temple District is naught but fire and ash, and we are surrounded on all sides. Take the shot and flee the city. Pursue Invigilata’s retreating forces, and link up with the Imperial assault along the Hemlock.’

‘You wish me to run?’

‘I wish you to live rather than die in vain, and save a weapon precious to the Imperium.’ Grimaldus broke off for a moment, and the pause was filled with the anger of distant guns. ‘We will be buried here, Jurisian. There is no dishonour that your fate is elsewhere.’

‘Call the primary target, Reclusiarch.’

‘You will see it as you manoeuvre through the Temple District, brother. It is called the *Godbreaker*.’

Four Titans soon barred his path.

Mightiest among them – and the last to arrive – was a Warlord, its armour plating black from paint, not battle-scarring. Its weapons trained down – immense barrels aimed at the Ordinatus platform. The numerological markings along the engine’s carapace marked it out as the *Bane-Sidhe*.

‘I am Princeps Amasat of Invigilata, sub-commander of the Crone’s forces and heir to her title in the wake of her demise. Explain this madness immediately.’

Jurisian looked at the city, and thought about his offer carefully before making it. He spoke with confidence, because he knew full well the Mechanicus had little other choice. He was going back into the city, and by the Machine-God, they were going to come with him.

The graveyard – that immense garden of raised stone and buried bone – played home to the storm of disorder that had until recently been raging its way through the Temple District.

The enemy had breached the temple walls at dawn on the second day, only to find that the graveyard was where the real defences stood in readiness. As tanks pounded the walls down and beasts scrabbled over the rubble, thousands of Helsreach’s last defenders waited behind mausoleums, gravestones, ornate tombs of city founders and shrines to treasured saints.

Burning beams of las-fire cobwebbed across the battlefield, slicing the alien beasts down in droves.

At the vanguard, a warrior clad in black and wielding a relic warhammer battled alongside a dwindling handful of his brothers. Every fall of his maul ended with the crunch of another alien life ended. His pistol, long since powered down and empty, dangled from the thick chain binding it to his wrist. Where the fighting was thickest, he wielded it like a flail, lashing it with whip-like force into bestial alien faces to shatter bone.

At his side, two swordsmen moved and spun in lethal unison. Priamus and Bayard, their bladework complementing one another’s perfectly, cutting and impaling with the same techniques, the same footwork, and at times, even in the very same moments.

With no banner to raise, not even the barest scraps left, Artarion laid about left and right with two chugging chainblades, their teeth-tracks already blunted and choked with gore. Bastilan supported him, precision bolter rounds punching home in alien flesh.

Nero was always moving, never allowed to rest for even a moment’s respite. He vaulted the enemy dead, bolter crashing out round after round as he blasted the beasts away from the body of another fallen brother, buying enough time to extract the gene-seed of the honoured dead.

This he did, time after time, with tears running down his pale face. The deaths did not move him; merely the feeling of dread futility that all his efforts would be in vain. Their genetic legacy might never escape this hive to be used in the creation of more Adeptus Astartes, and no Chapter could afford to bear the loss of a hundred slain warriors with easy dignity.

Around the time Jurisian was entering the city, escorted by five Titans from Legio Invigilata, the Imperial defences were straining to hold the outer limits of the graveyard. Cries of ‘Fall back! Fall back to the temple!’ started to spread through the scattered lines.

Assigned squads, appointed teams, random groups of men and women – all began to back away from the unending grind of the alien advance.

The Baneblade exploded, sending flaming shrapnel spinning in a hundred directions. The Imperials nearest to the tank – those that weren’t thrown from their feet – started to flee in earnest.

But there is nowhere to fall back to. Nowhere to run.

Like a lance pushed close to breaking point, our resistance is bending, the flanks being forced back behind the centre.

No. I will not die here, in this graveyard, beaten into darkness because these savages have greater numbers than we do. The enemy does not deserve such a victory.

My boots clang on the sloped armour plating as I leap and sprint up the roof of the crippled, burning Baneblade. In the maelstrom around the rocket-struck tank, I see the 101st Steel Legion and a gathering of dockworkers trying to fall back in a panicked hurry, their forward ranks being scythed down by bloodstained axes in green-knuckled fists.

Enough of this.

The beast I am seeking seeks me out in turn. Huge, towering above its lesser kin, packed with unnatural muscle around its malformed bones and reeking of the fungal blood that fuels its foul heart. It launches itself onto the tank’s hull, perhaps expecting some titanic duel to impress its tribe. A champion, perhaps. A chieftain. It matters not. The brutes’ leaders rarely resist the chance to engage Imperial commanders in full view – they are loathsomely predictable.

There is no time for sport. My first strike is my last, hammering through its guard, shattering its crossed axes and pounding the aquila head of my

crozius into its roaring face.

It topples from the Baneblade, all loose limbs and worthless armour, as pathetic in death as it had been in life.

I hear Priamus laughing from the tank's side, voxing it through his helm's speakers, mocking the beasts even as he slays them. On the other side, Artarion and Bastilan do the same. The orks redouble their assault with twice the fury and half the skill, and though I could reprimand my brothers-for this indignity, I do not.

My laughter joins theirs.

Asavan Tortellius was serene, and that surprised him given the shaking of the walls and the sounds of war's thunder. This was no Titan's fortress-cathedral back, where he had learned to worship in safety. This was a temple besieged.

It had not taken long to find work to do within the basilica. He quickly came to realise that he was the only priest with experience of preaching on the battlefield. Most of the lay brothers and low-ranking Ecclesiarchy servants spent their time attending to their daily tasks in hurried nervousness, praying the war would remain outside the walls. Several others cowered in the undercroft with the refugees, doing more harm than good and failing to ease a single soul with their stuttering, sweating sermons.

Asavan descended into the sublevel, immediately marked out from the other preachers by his grimy robes and dishevelled hair. He walked among the people, offering gentle words to families as he passed. He was especially patient with the children, giving them the blessing of the God-Emperor in His aspect as the Machine-God, and saying personal prayers over individual boys and girls that seemed the most weary or withdrawn.

There was a lone guard stationed at the bottom of the stairs. She was slight of frame, both short and slender, wearing a suit of power armour that seemed too bulky to be comfortable. In her hands was a boltgun, the weapon held across her chest as she stood to attention.

Asavan moved over to her, his worn boots whispering across the dusty stone.

'Hello, sister,' he said, keeping his voice low.

She remained unmoving, at perfect attention, though he could see the

tremor in her eyes that betrayed how difficult she found it to bear this rigid nothingness.

'My name is Asavan Tortellius,' he told her. 'Will you please lower the weapon?'

She looked at him, her eyes meeting his. She didn't lower the bolter.

'What is your name?' he asked her.

'Sister Maralin of the Holy Order of the Ar–'

'Hello, Maralin. Be at ease, for the enemy is still outside the walls. Might I ask you, please, to lower the weapon?'

'Why?' she leaned closer to whisper.

'Because you are making the people here even more nervous than they already are. By all means, be visible. You are their defender, and they will take comfort in your presence. But walk among them, and offer a few kind words. Do not stand there in grim silence, weapon held tight. You are giving them greater reason to fear, and that is not why you were sent down here, Maralin.'

She nodded. 'Thank you, Father.' The bolter came down. She mag-locked it to her thigh plate.

'Come,' he smiled, 'let me introduce you to some of them.'

The Bane-Sidhe's void shields rippled and rained sparks, brought into visibility as another layer was stripped by the explosive shells raining against them. A short growl of accumulating power ended in a blasting discharge of energy as the Warlord annihilated the tanks laying claim to the Hel's Highway ahead.

A black, smoking scorch smear was all the evidence that the tanks had ever existed. Behind the striding *Bane-Sidhe, Oberon* drifted forward on its gravity suspensors, gently cruising over any obstructions in its path. Bringing up the column's rear were the clanking, ungainly Warhounds that *Bane-Sidhe* had ordered back into the city.

The agreement made was monumentally simple, and that was why Jurisian was certain it would work.

'Defend *Oberon*,' he'd said. 'Defend it for long enough to take a single shot, to down the enemy command gargant. Then the Ordinatus will be surrendered into your control during the retreat towards the Hemlock River.'

What choice did they have? Amasat's voice over the vox was harsh with the promise of recrimination should the plan fail to run smooth. Jurisian, for his part, could not have cared less. He had the support he needed, and he had a primary target to destroy.

Infantry resistance was met with punishing and instant devastation. Armour formations endured no longer. Through the Temple District, they encountered precious little in the way of enemy engines.

'That is because, blasphemer, Invigilata left the enemy Titan contingent in ruins.'

'Except for the *Godbreaker*,' the Forgemaster replied. 'Except for the slayer of *Stormherald.'*

Amasat chose not to retort.

'I have nothing on my auspex,' he said instead.

'Nor I,' reported one of the Warhound princeps.

'I see nothing,' confirmed the other.

'Keep hunting. Draw closer to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.'

The Mechanicus convoy traversed the urban ruination in bitter dignity for another eight minutes and twenty-three seconds before Amasat voxed again.

'Almost one quarter of the enemy inside this hive is embattled at the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. You are threatening Oberon *with destruction as well as desecration? Does your heresy know no end?'*

It was Jurisian's turn to abstain from the argument.

'I have a thermal signature,' he said, studying the dim auspex console to the left of his control throne. 'It has a plasma shadow, much too hot to be natural flame.'

'I see nothing. Coordinates?'

Jurisian transmitted the location codes. It was on the very edge of scanning range, and still several minutes away.

'It is moving to the temple.'

'Locomotion qualifiers?'

'Faster than us.'

The pause was almost painful, broken by Amasat's sneering tone. *'Then I will give you the victory you require.* Talisman *and* Hallowed Verity *– remain with the blessed weapon.'*

'Yes, princeps,' both Warhounds responded.

Bane-Sidhe leaned forward, its armoured shoulders hunching as it moved

into a straining stride. Jurisian listened to the protesting gears, the overworked joints, hearing the engine’s machine-spirit cry out in the stress of metal under tension. He said a quiet word of thanks for the sacrifice about to be made.

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CHAPTER XXIII

KNIGHTFALL

Andrej and Maghernus skidded into the basilica's first chamber, their bloody boots finding loose purchase on the mosaic-inlaid floor. Dozens of Guardsmen and militia dispersed through the vast hall, catching their breath and taking up defensive points around pillars and behind pews.

The final fallback was beginning in earnest. The graveyard outside was blanketed in enemy dead, but the last few hundred Imperials could no longer hold any ground with their own numbers depleted.

'This room…' the former dockmaster was breathing heavily, '…doesn't have much cover.'

Andrej was unslinging his back-mounted power pack. 'It is a nave.'

'What?'

'This room. It is called a nave. And you are speaking the truth – there is no defence here.' The storm trooper drew his pistol and started running deeper into the temple.

'Where are you going? What about your rifle?

'It is out of power! Now follow, we must find the priest!'

Ryken fired with his autopistol, taking a moment between shots to regain his aim. It was a custom, heavy-duty model that wouldn't have been out of place in an underhive gangfight, and as he crouched by a black stone shrine to a saint he didn't recognise, the gun barked hot and hard in his fist, ejecting spent cartridges that clattered off nearby gravestones.

'Fall back, sir!' one of his men was yelling. The alien beasts crashed through the graveyard like an apocalyptic flood, a unbreakable tide of noise.

‘Not yet…’

‘*Now,* you ass, come on!’ Tyro dragged at his shoulder. It threw off his aim, but to hell with it – it was like spitting into the ocean anyway. He scrambled away from the relative cover of the weeping statue just in time to miss it being shattered into chips and shards by raking fire from a fully-automatic enemy stubber.

‘Are they coming?’ he shouted to his second officer, limping badly now.

‘Who?’

‘The bloody Templars!’

They were not coming.

To the retreating human survivors, it seemed as if the black knights had lost all sense, all reason, cutting their way forward while the humans that had supported them broke ranks and fled back.

No one could see why.

No one was getting a clear answer from the vox.

Bayard was dead.

Priamus saw the great champion fall, and all flair in his killing strokes was abandoned in a heartbeat. He slew with all the grace of a peasant chopping lumber upon the face of some backwater rural world, his masterwork sword reduced to a club with a vicious edge and draped in lethal energy.

‘Nerovar!’ he screamed his brother’s name into the vox. *‘Nerovar!’*

Other Templars took up the cry, summoning the Apothecary to extract the gene-seed of a Chapter hero.

Bayard stood almost slouched against the wall of an ornate mausoleum shaped from pink-veined white stone. The body had not fallen only because of the crude spear pinning it through the throat. A killing blow, without a shadow of doubt. Priamus spared a moment of desperate blocks and thrusts, taking an axe blow against his pauldron, risking a second’s distraction to pull the spear free. The ork’s axe threw off sparks as it crashed aside from the ceramite shoulder guard. The corpse of the Emperor’s Champion slumped to the ground, freed of its undignified need to stand.

‘Nerovar!’ Priamus cried again.

It was Bastilan that reached him first. The sergeant’s helm was gone, revealing a face so bloody only the whites of his eyeballs revealed him as

human any more. Torn flaps of skin hung in wet patches, leaving his head open to the bone beneath.

'The Black Sword!'

Priamus deflected another dozen cuts in four beats of his pounding twin hearts. He had no time to reach for the blessed weapon Bayard had dropped in death.

Bastilan's ruined face vanished in a burst of red mist. Priamus had already rammed his power sword through the chest of the bolter-wielding ork behind the sergeant by the time Bastilan's headless body crashed to the ground with the dull clang of ceramite on stone.

'Nerovar!'

With Bastilan's last words, something changed within the Templars.

Twelve remained. Of these, only seven would escape what followed.

The knights pulled together, their blades slashing and carving not only to kill their foes, but to defend their brothers alongside them. It was an instinctive savagery born of so many decades fighting at each others' sides, and it spread through their failing ranks now as they stood on the precipice of destruction.

'Take the sword!' Grimaldus roared. His charge carried him ahead of the others, hammering his crozius in arhythmic fury, smashing a bloody path through to Priamus. *'Recover the Black Sword!'*

We cannot leave it here. It cannot lie abandoned on a battlefield while one of us yet lives.

Over the vox, the humans are calling us insane and begging us to fall back with them. To them, this bloodshed must seem like madness, but there is no choice. We will not be the only Crusade to violate our most sacred tradition. The Black Sword will remain in black hands until there are none left to bear it.

I have a moment – just a single moment – of reflexive pain when I see Bayard's body next to Bastilan's. Two of the finest Sword Brethren ever to serve the Chapter, now slain in glory. More alien bodies block my view. More xenos bleed as I force my way closer to Priamus.

A sense of bloodthirsty, eerie calm descends between us. The battle rages, weapons clashing against our armour, but I speak in a fierce whisper that I

know carries over the vox to him and him alone.

‘Priamus.’

‘Reclusiarch.’

My maul sends two of the beasts flying back, and for a heartbeat’s span, there are no alien barbarians separating us. Our eye lenses meet for that precious second, before we are both forced to turn and engage other foes.

‘You are the last Emperor’s Champion of the Helsreach Crusade,’ I tell him. ‘*Now recover your blade.’*

Major Ryken spoke into his hand-vox, repeating the same words he’d been saying for almost a minute. His voice echoed around the nave in curiously calm counterpoint to the ragged breathing and moans of pain from the wounded.

‘Any armour units still outside the basilica, respond. The *Godbreaker* has been sighted due south of the temple walls. Any armour units still outside, engage, engage.’

From his viewpoint by one of the broken stained glass windows, he watched the gargant’s torso rising above the broken graveyard walls in the distance.

He didn’t recognise the voice that eventually answered. It sounded both bitter and disgusted, but it still made Ryken grin.

‘Engaging.’

‘Hello? Identify yourself!’

‘I am Princeps Amasat of the Warlord Titan Bane-Sidhe.*’*

The Bane-Sidhe, named for a shrieking monster from ancient Terran mythology, did everything in its power to gain the *Godbreaker*’s attention. Opening salvoes from its arm-cannons and shoulder-mounted weapon batteries lashed against the larger Titan’s force fields. Siren horns, used to warn loyal infantry of the Titan’s passing close – or even through – their regiments, blared now at the enemy engine. Whatever primitive communications array passed for a vox system on board the *Godbreaker* was scrambled into white noise by a focussed spike of machine-code from *Bane-Sidhe*’s tech-adepts.

All of this was enough to drag the towering beast-machine away from its intent to flatten the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.

The Warlord, thirty-three metres of armour plating and city-killing weaponry forged into an iconic image of the Machine-God Himself, began its shameful retreat. All guns fired at will as it clanked backwards, drawing the *Godbreaker* away from the last Imperials alive in the hive's most sacred sector.

'May I have a weapon, please?'

Andrej shrugged as he cleaned his goggles with a dirty cloth. 'I have no other pistol, fat priest. For this, I apologise.'

Tomaz Maghernus shook his head when Asavan looked his way. 'I don't, either.'

Several maidens of the Order of the Argent Shroud came down the wide stairs into the undercroft. Prioress Sindal led them, carrying her bolter with ease due to the machine-muscles of her power armour.

'It is time to seal the undercroft,' the old woman said, her voice low. She, at least, knew the merits of not panicking the refugees gathered in the sublevel. 'The beasts have reached the inner grounds.'

'May I have a weapon, please?' Asavan asked her.

'Have you ever fired a bolter?'

'Until this month, I had never even seen a bolter. Nevertheless, I would like a weapon with which to defend these people.'

'Father, with the greatest respect, it would do you no good. My thanks for comforting the flock, but it is time to prepare for the end. Everyone who is staying behind, be ready to be sealed down here within the next three minutes. The oxygen should last a month, as long as the xenos do not destroy the air filtration systems above ground.'

Andrej raised a singed eyebrow. 'And if they do?'

'Use your imagination, Guardsman. And return to the surface, quickly. Every able body is needed in defence of the temple.'

'A moment, please.' Andrej turned back to Asavan. 'Fat priest. You are destined to either survive this, or die at least some time later than I.' He handed the holy man a small leather pouch. Asavan took it, clutching it tight in fingers that would have trembled in this moment only weeks before.

'What is this?'

'My mother's wedding ring, and a letter of explanation. Once this is over, if you are still drawing breath, please find Trooper Natalina Domoska of the

91st Steel Elite. You will recognise her – this, I promise to you. She is the most beautiful woman in the world. Every man says so.'

'*Move*, young man,' the prioress insisted.

Andrej snapped a crisp salute to the overweight priest, and made his way back up the stairs, his laspistol held in both hands. Maghernus followed him, casting a lingering look back at Asavan and the refugees. He waved as the underground bulkheads slammed closed. Asavan didn't seem to see, preoccupied with the refugees who were rising to their feet in panic and protest.

Several of the battle-sisters remained at the base of the stairs, entering codes to seal the doors and imprison the civilians away from harm. The prioress managed to keep up with Andrej and Maghernus. The dockmaster smiled at her, knowing the gesture was meaningless and filled with melancholy. She returned the smile, her expression carrying the same emotions as his. The temple was shaking as the orks battered at its walls.

The next time Maghernus would see Prioress Sindal of the Order of the Argent Shroud, she would be a mangled corpse in three pieces, spread across the floor of the inner sanctum.

That would be in less than one hour's time, and her body would be one of the last things he saw before he was killed by a bolt-round in the back.

Bane-Sidhe tore clean through the Hel's Highway when it fell.

The Warlord had made it half a kilometre before its void shields burst out of existence and its front-facing armour began to suffer the assault from the *Godbreaker*'s guns. No matter how thick the ceramite and adamantium plating covering the Warlord's vital systems, the sheer level of firepower hurled at *Bane-Sidhe* meant that once its shields died, its existence was measured in minutes.

It was perhaps unfair that such a noble example of the Invigilata's god-machines met its end as a sacrificial lure, but within the Legio's archives, both *Bane-Sidhe* and her command crew were given the highest honours. The wreckage of the Titan would come to be salvaged by the Mechanicus in the following weeks, and restored to working order fourteen months later. Its destruction at Helsreach was marked upon its carapace with a six-metre square engraved image upon its right shin, depicting a weeping angel over a burning, metallic skeleton.

Unable to withstand any more punishment, with flames pouring from its bridge, the great Warlord fell backwards on howling joints. Its immense weight was enough to break the rockcrete columns holding up the Hel's Highway, sending the *Bane-Sidhe* and a significant section of the main road crashing down to land in a mountain of rubble.

The *Godbreaker* stood over the crater of broken road, as if staring down at the body of its latest kill.

Fourteen seconds after the Warlord's shattered remains came to a rest, a flare of sun-bright and fusion-hot energy screamed across the Hel's Highway. It was the shape of a newborn star, flaring with arcing coils of plasma light and surrounded by a blinding corona.

The *Godbreaker*'s shields disintegrated at the sunfire's touch. Its armour disintegrated mere seconds later, as did its crew, skeletal structure, and all evidence that it had ever existed.

Jurisian drooled through clenched teeth, feeling the untamed machine-spirit's quivering rage at being used without being ritually blessed and activated via the correct rituals. As the knifing pain in his skull faded to tolerable levels, he opened a vox-link to Grimaldus, and breathed two words.

They were laden with both agony and meaning – symbolising the completion of his duty, and a final farewell.

'Engine kill,' he said.

'The Godbreaker is dead,' Grimaldus voxed to anyone still listening to the comms channels. The news brought no relief to him, and no joy, even for thought of Jurisian's glory. There was nothing now beyond the next second of battle. Step by step, the Reclusiarch and his last brothers were pushed backwards through the basilica, room by room, hall by hall.

The air reeked of alien breath, spilled innards and the sharp overcooked ozone scent of las-fire.

The walls still shook as xenos tanks shelled the holy temple even while their own forces stormed through it.

A young girl in Argent Shroud battle armour was cut down, wailing as she was disembowelled by the horde. Artarion's two blades, both inactive from meat-clogging and no more use than jagged clubs, ripped across the face and throat of the girl's killer. Then he too was beaten back by the four

beasts that took the dead brute's place.

A voice rose above the carnage – harsh and enraged.

'Kill them all! Let none survive! Never has an alien defiled this holiest of places!'

Grimaldus dragged the closest ork against him, gripping its throat and thudding his skulled helm against its face to shatter its hideous bone structure. The voice was the prioress's, and he realised now where he was.

No.

No, how could it all be over already?

We have been beaten back to the inner sanctum in mere hours. Sindal's cries of defiance have the worst effect: they awaken everyone from the mindless heat of battle and bloodshed, dragging us back to face the truth.

The inner sanctum is a gore-slick mess of heaving, slashing, shooting humans and orks. We are beaten. No one in this room is going to survive more than a few more minutes. Already, others have sensed this and I see them through the crowd, trying to run from the room, seeking a way past the orks rather than lay down their lives at the last stand.

Militia. Civilians. Guard. Even several storm troopers. Half of our pathetic remaining force is breaking from the battle and trying to run.

With my hand still at the ork's throat, I drag the kicking beast up with me, standing atop the Major Altar. The beast struggles, but its clawing is weak with its skull broken and its senses disoriented by pain.

My plasma pistol is long gone, torn from me at some point in the last two days of battle. The chain remains. I wrap it around the beast's throat, and roar my words to the painted ceiling as I strangle the creature in full view of everyone in the room.

'Take heart, brothers! Fight in the Emperor's name!' The beast thrashes as it dies, claws scraping in futility at my ruined armour. I tense my grip, feeling the creature's thick spinal bones begin to click and break. Its piggish eyes are wide with terror, and this… this makes me laugh.

'I have dug my grave in this place…' An explosive round detonates on my shoulder, blasting shards of armour free. I see Priamus kill the shooter with the Black Sword in a one-handed grip.

'I have dug my grave in this place, and I will either triumph or I will die!'

Five knights still live, and they roar as I roar.

‘No pity! No remorse! No fear!’

The walls shudder as if kicked by a Titan. For a moment, still laughing, I wonder if the *Godbreaker* has returned.

‘Until the end, brothers!’

The cry is taken up by those of us that yet draw breath, and we fight on.

‘They’re bringing the temple down!’ Priamus calls, and there is something wrong with his voice. I realise what it is when I see my brother is missing an arm and his leg armour is pierced in three places.

I have never heard him in pain before.

‘Nero!’ he screams. ‘Nerovar!’

The beasts are primitive, but they are not devoid of intelligence and cunning. Nero’s white markings signal him as an Apothecary, and they know of his value to humanity. Priamus sees him first, two dozen metres away through the melee. An alien spear has punched its way through his stomach, and several of the beasts are lifting him from the ground, raising him like a war banner above the carnage.

Nerovar dies like no warrior I have ever seen before. Even as I try to kill my way closer to him, I see him gripping the spear in his fists, hauling himself down the weapon, impaling himself deeper on it in an attempt to reach the aliens below.

He has no bolter, no chainblade. His last act in life is to draw his gladius from its sheath at his thigh and hurl it down with a Templar’s vengeance at the ork with the best grip on the spear. He’d dragged himself down to get close enough to ensure he wouldn’t miss. The short sword bit true, sinking into the beast’s gaping maw and rewarding the xenos with an agonising death, choking on a sword blade that had ravaged its throat, tongue and lungs. With the beast unable to keep hold, the spear falls and Nero plunges into a seething mass of greenskins.

I never see him again.

Priamus, one-armed and faltering now, staggers ahead of me. A detonating round crashes against his helm, spinning him back to face me.

‘Grimaldus,’ he says, before falling to his knees. ‘Brother…’

Flames engulf him from the side – clinging chemical fire that washes over his armour, eating into the soft joints and dissolving the flesh beneath. The ork with the flamer pans the weapon left and right, dousing Priamus in corrosive fire.

I am hammering my way with painful slowness to avenge him when Artarion's blade bursts from the ork's chest. He kicks the dying ork from his broken chainsword. With vengeance taken, my standard bearer turns with as much grace as can be salvaged in this butchery, and his back slams against mine.

'Goodbye, brother.' He's laughing as he says the words, and I do not know why, but it brings out my own laughter.

Blocks of the ceiling are falling now, crushing those beneath. The orks in here with us, paying for every human life with five of their own, pay no heed to their kin outside damning them by destroying the temple with them still inside.

Not far from the altar, I catch a final glimpse of the storm trooper and the dockmaster. The former stands above the dying latter, Andrej defending the gut-shot Maghernus while he tries to comprehend what to do with his bowels looping across his lap and the floor nearby.

'Artarion,' I call to him, to return the farewell, but there is no answer. The presence against my back is not my brother.

I turn, laughing at the madness before me. Artarion is dead at my feet, headless, defiled. The enemy drive me to my knees, but even this is no more than a bad joke. They are doomed as surely as I am.

I am still laughing when the temple finally falls.

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EPILOGUE

ASHES

They call it the Season of Fire.

The Ash Wastes are choking with dust from roaring volcanoes. Planet-wide, the picts show the same images, over and over. Our vessels in orbit watch Armageddon breathe fire, and send the images back to the surface, so that those there might witness the world's anger in its entirety.

Fighting across most of the world is ceasing, not because of victory or defeat, but because there can be no arguing with Armageddon itself. The ash deserts are already turning dark. In a handful of days, no man or xenos beast will be able to breathe in the wastelands. Their lungs would fill with ashes and embers; their war machines would grind to a halt, fouled beyond use.

So the war ceases for now. It does not end. There is no tale of triumph and victory to tell.

The beasts stagger and crawl back to cities they have managed to hold, there to hide away from the Season of Fire. Imperial forces consolidate the territories to which they still lay claim, and drive the invaders out from those where the orks have managed to grasp no more than a weak hold.

Helsreach is one of these places. That necropolis, in which one hundred of my brothers lie dead alongside hundreds of thousands of loyal souls…

That tomb-city, so much of which is flattened by the devastation of two months' road-by-road warfare, with no industrial output left at all…

Imperial tacticians are hailing it as a *victory.*

I will never again understand the humanity I left behind when I ascended to the ranks of the Templars. The perceptions of humans remain alien to me

since the moment I swore my first oaths to Dorn.

But I will let the people of this blighted world claim their triumph. I will let the survivors of Helsreach cheer and celebrate a drawn-out defeat that masquerades as victory.

And, as they have requested, I will return to the surface once more.

I have something of theirs in my possession.

They cheer in the streets, and line Hel's Highway as if in anticipation of a parade. Several hundred civilians, and an equal number of off-duty Guard. They stand in crowds, clustered either side of the *Grey Warrior.*

My helm's aural receptors filter the noise of their cheering to less irritating levels, the way it would do if an artillery battery was shelling the ground around me.

I try not to stare at them, at their flushed faces, at their bright and joyous eyes. The war is over to them. They care nothing for the orbital images that show entire ork armies taking root in other hives. For the people of Helsreach, the war is over. They are alive, so they have won.

It is hard not to admire such simple purity. Blessed is the mind too small for doubt. And in truth, I have never seen a city resist invasion so fiercely. The people here have earned the lives they still have.

This part of the city, not far from the accursed docks, is relatively unscathed. It remained a stronghold firmly in Imperial control. I am given to understand that Sarren and his 101st fought here to the last day.

A gathering of figures clusters by the *Grey Warrior.* Most wear the ochre uniforms of the Steel Legion. One of them, a man known to me, beckons me over.

I walk to him, and the crowd erupts into more cheers. It is the first time I have moved in almost an hour.

An hour of listening to tedious speeches transmitted from the gathered group, over to a vox-tower nearby that blares the words across the sector.

'Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Black Templars,' the vox-voice booms. More cheers as I draw close. The soldier that beckoned to me offers quiet greetings.

Major, or rather, *Colonel* Ryken has regained much of his face since I last saw him. Burn scars spread across much of the remaining skin, but over half of his features are dull-metalled augmetics, including significant

reconstruction to his skull. He makes the sign of the aquila, and only one of his hands is his own. The other is a skeletal bionic, not yet sheathed in synthetic skin.

I return the salute. The vox-speech – the speaker is a member of General Kurov's staff I have never met before – drones on about my own heroism alongside the Steel Legion. As my name is shouted by thousands of humans, I raise my fist in salute to them all.

And all the while, I am thinking how my brothers died here.

Died for them.

'Did Adjutant Quintus Tyro survive?' I ask.

He nods, his ruined face trying to make a smile. 'Cyria made it.'

Good. I am pleased for him, and for her.

'Hello, sir,' another of the Legionnaires says. I glance behind Ryken, to a man several places down the line. My targeting reticule locks on him – onto his grinning face. He is unscarred, and despite his youth, has laugh lines at the corner of his eyes.

So. He's not dead, either.

This does not surprise me. Some men are born with luck in their blood.

I nod to him, and he walks over, seemingly as bored with proceedings as I am. The orator is declaring how I 'smote the blaspheming aliens as they dared defile the temple's inner sanctum'. His words border on a sermon. He would have made a fine ecclesiarch, or a preacher in the Imperial Guard.

The ochre-clad soldier offers his hand for me to shake. I humour him by doing the same.

'Hello, hero,' he grins up at me.

'Greetings, Andrej.'

'I like your armour. It is much nicer now. Did you repaint it yourself, or is that the duty of slaves?'

I cannot tell if this is a joke or not.

'Myself.'

'Good! Good. Perhaps you should salute me now, though, yes?' He taps his epaulettes, where a captain's badges now show, freshly issued and polished silver.

'I am not beholden to a Guard captain,' I tell him. 'But congratulations.'

'Yes, I know, I know. But I must be offering many thanks for you keeping your word and telling my captain of my deeds.'

‘An oath is an oath.’ I have no idea what to say to the little man. ‘Your friend. Your love. Did you find her?’

I am no judge of human emotion, but I see his smile turn fragile and false. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I did find her.’

I think of the last time I saw the little storm trooper, standing over the dockmaster’s bloody corpse, bayoneting an alien in the throat, only moments before the basilica fell.

I find myself curiously glad that he is alive, but expressing that notion is not something I can easily forge into words. He has no such difficulty.

‘I am glad you made it,’ he uses my own unspoken words. ‘I heard you were very injured, yes?’

‘Not enough to kill me.’

But so close. I quickly grew bored of the Apothecaries on board the *Crusader* telling me that it was a miracle I clawed my way from the rubble.

He laughs, but there is little joy in it. His eyes are like glass since he mentioned finding his friend.

‘You are a very literal man, Reclusiarch. Some of us were in lazy moods that day. I waited for the digging crews, yes, I admit it. I did not have Adeptus Astartes armour to push the rocks off myself and get back to fighting the very next day.’

‘The reports I have heard indicated no one else survived the fall of the basilica,’ I tell him.

He laughs. ‘Yes, that would make for a wonderful story, no? The last black knight, the only survivor of the greatest battle in Helsreach. I apologise for surviving and breaking the flow of your legend, Reclusiarch. I promise most faithfully that I and the six or seven others will be very quiet and let you have all the thunder.’

He has made a joke. I recognise it, and try to think of something humorous with which to reply. Nothing surfaces in my mind.

‘Were you not injured at all?’

He shrugs. ‘I had a headache. But then it went away.’

This makes me smile.

‘Did you meet the fat priest?’ he asks. ‘Did you know him?’

‘I confess, I do not recall anyone by that name or description.’

‘He was a good man. You would have liked him. Very brave. He did not die in the battle. He was with the civilians. But he died two weeks after,

from a problem with his heart. Ayah, that is unfair, I think. To live through the end and die at the new beginning? Not so fair, I am thinking.'

There is a twisted poetry to that.

I would like to speak words that comfort him. I would like to tell him I admire his courage, and that his world will survive this war. I want to speak with the ease Artarion would have done, and thank this soldier for standing with us when so many others ran. He honoured us all in that moment, as did the dying dockmaster, the prioress, and every other soul that faded from life on the night only I survived.

But I say nothing. Further conversation is broken by people chanting my name. How alien it sounds, voiced by human throats.

The orator whips the crowd up, speaking – of course – of the relics. They want to see them, and that is why I am here. To display them.

I signal the cenobyte servitors forward. Augmetic servants, vat-grown by the Chapter's Apothecaries and augmented by Jurisian to haul the temple's artefacts. None of the mindless wretches bear a name; just a relic that represents all I could do to ease my guilt at such a shameful defeat.

The crowd cheers again as the servitors move from the vulture shadow of my Thunderhawk, each of the three carrying one of the artefacts. The ragged scraps of the banner. The cracked stone pillar, topped by the shattered aquila. The sacred bronze globe, sloshing with its precious holy water.

My voice carries with ease, amplified by my helm. The crowd quietens, and Hel's Highway falls silent. I am reminded, against my will, of the impenetrable silence beneath the mountain of marble and rockcrete when the temple came down upon us all.

'We are judged in life,' I tell them, 'for the evil we destroy'.

Never my words. Always Mordred's.

For the first time, I have an answer to them. A greater understanding. And my mentor… You were wrong. Forgive me, that it took so long to leave your shadow and realise it. Forgive me, that it took the deaths of my brothers to learn the lesson they each tried to teach me while they yet drew breath.

Artarion. Priamus. Bastilan. Cador. Nero.

Forgive me for living, while you all lie cold and still.

'We are judged in life for the evil we destroy. It is a bleak truth, that there

is nothing but blood awaiting us in the spaces between the stars. But the Emperor sees all that transpires in His domain. And we are judged equally for the illumination we bring to the blackest nights. We are judged in life for those moments we spill light into the darkest reaches of His Imperium.

‘Your world taught me this. Your world, and the war that brought me here.

‘These are your relics. The last treasures of the first men and women ever to set foot upon your world. They are the most precious treasures of your ancestors, and they are yours by right of legacy and blood.

‘I return them to you from the edge of destruction. And I thank you not only for the honour of standing by the people of this city, but for the lessons I have learned. My brothers in orbit have asked me why I dragged these relics from beneath the fallen temple. But you have no need to ask, for you each already know the answer. They are *yours*, and no alien beast will deny the people of this world the inheritance they deserve.

‘I dragged these relics back into the sunlight for you – to honour you, and to thank you all. And in humility now, I return them to you.’

This time, when the cheers come, they are shaped by the orator. He uses the title I swore to High Marshal Helbrecht, standing before Mordred’s statue, that I would not refuse when it was formally awarded to me.

‘I am told,’ the High Marshal had said afterwards, ‘that Yarrick and Kurov have spoken with the Ecclesiarchy. You are being given the relics, to carry Helsreach’s memory and honour with you, in the Eternal Crusade.’

‘When I return to the surface, I will offer the icons back to the people.’

‘Mordred would not have done so,’ Helbrecht said, masking any emotion, any judgement, from me.

‘I am not Mordred,’ I told my liege. ‘And the people deserve the choice. It is for them that we waged that war, for them and their world. Not purely for the holy reaping of inhuman life.’

And I wonder now, as they chant my new title, what they will decide to do with the relics.

Hero of Helsreach, the crowd cheers.

As if there is only one.

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BLOOD AND FIRE

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

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PROLOGUE

THESE WORDS, THESE LIES

Grimaldus. They lied to us about the Mannheim Gap. They sent us there to die.

You know of whom I speak. We cannot outrun the echoes of Khattar. We pay the price now for our virtue in the past.

We are sons of Dorn and we know nothing of surrender, even when victory is out of reach. What concerns us is injustice. Ignominy. If we could be said to fear anything, it is the shame of our legacy being fouled by lies.

And if the Imperium remembers us at all, it will be as one of mankind's most grievous failures. But we have not failed mankind; mankind has failed itself. The bitter hearts and closed minds of weak men and women will see us dead before dawn.

So be it.

Our enemies do not move in the light, where they run the risk of facing our blades. Nor are they truly in the shadows, but they occupy positions of power so far above us in the hierarchy of man that exact identities become meaningless. They have the power and influence to deceive us, and deceive us they did.

The Celestial Lions will never leave this world. A handful of us remain, but we know the truth. We died at the Mannheim Gap. We died the day the sun rose over the scrap-iron bodies of alien gods.

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I

SEASON OF FIRE

We were warned, as if we needed warning, not to go out into the storm. The air was already severe enough to scald unprotected flesh, and while our armour offered a shield against the elements, it wouldn't protect us for long. All trace of our sacred colours was already flayed away by the gritty wind, leaving us clad in gunmetal grey, stripped of paint and heraldry. I wondered, just briefly, if there was a metaphor in that moment. If so, it remained for one of keener humour to uncover.

The downed gunship was a beached, smashed memory of a thing, all lethality stolen by the savagery of its crash landing. In contrast, the Valkyrie we had acquired from the 101st Steel Legion sat hunched on the sands, a bored crow with its curved wings spread wide. I'd had cause to use this vehicle many times in the past month, and I could not dissuade myself of the notion that its machine-spirit despised me. If gunships could scowl, that one most certainly did. I looked back at it, its turbine engines still howling impatiently, its grey-green hull being abraded to dull silver by the desert wind. I could hear just how little the engines enjoyed eating this dust.

The pilot was a uniformed blur behind the scratched windshield. He had volunteered for this mission, despite its risks. I admired him for it.

The weeks since my convalescence had passed slowly. I was coming to believe I would never be wholly comfortable with the humans' regard. The people of Helsreach looked upon me as some kind of icon, purely for the virtue of doing my duty. Why did it make me uncomfortable? There are a hundred difficult answers to that. We of the Adeptus Astartes are a breed apart from the humans we might have been. Let that be enough of an

explanation.

I turned back to the downed Storm Eagle. Whatever colours it had borne into battle were long gone, stolen by the storm. Its symbols of allegiance were similarly eroded by the ash and dirt in the turbulent air.

Cyneric ducked under the slanted wing, one side of his armour still black in patches where it hadn't yet faced the storm. In his left hand, an auspex scanner sputtered and clicked, murdered by the storm's interference. He said nothing, which was answer enough.

I climbed the rolled hull, braced against the wind by the magnetic locks on the bottom of my boots. The last oath-scroll on my armour was ripped away. I let the wind steal it, to take my inscribed Litanies of Hate into the storm. It felt curiously apt.

The bulkhead was sealed from within. I drew my crozius maul, and heard its energy field buzzing against the grit in the air. It took a single blow, with the sound of a muted belltower, and the bulkhead was gone. I hauled the mangled door free with one hand, and cast it down to the ground. Cyneric still said nothing. It was a habit I liked to encourage.

The interior of the crashed Storm Eagle was set at a stark angle, with equipment crates and loose weapons scattered across the confined crew bay. The cockpit was no better, but what the reinforced visor screen hid from the outside was revealed at once: a lone Space Marine, clad in burnished gold, lying in ungainly repose where the deck met the weapon-racked walls. I knew those colours. I knew the Chapter's heraldry.

What I didn't know was what this gunship was doing all the way out here, so far from Hive Volcanus.

Cyneric dropped down behind me, the chains binding his weapons to his armour rattling in sympathy to his movements. I heard his breathing over the squad's vox link, then came the curse, as he saw what I saw.

'It is the Lions,' he said.

It was just one Lion. The pilot. And from the faint signs of darkening decay in evidence once I removed his azure helm, he was several days dead. None of this made sense.

Before I rose, I pressed my rosarius amulet to the dead warrior's forehead. Cyneric questioned this. Why offer the Lion these last rites? Was he not of another Chapter?

It was not disrespectful to question my actions. It was his duty. He must

learn what I do and why I did it.

As I stood again, I asked Cyneric why he objected to this salute of a fallen warrior's soul.

'Because he is not a knight,' he told me. 'The Lion was not one of us.'

I had used the very same reasons myself, often enough. Even with the noble Salamanders, not so long ago. Yet there were exceptions.

'He does not wear the cross of our calling,' I admitted, 'but he was Dorn's son, as surely as we are. Bloodlines reach beyond Chapter heraldry, Cyneric.'

'Forgive me, master.'

'Forgiveness is irrelevant. There is nothing to forgive.'

Cyneric had only served at my side for three weeks, and still felt the weight of tradition and expectation that comes with the chance of bearing a skull helm. It would be my choice whether to admit him into the sacred mysteries of the Chapter cult; he would be a Chaplain at my command, or he would return to the rank and file.

Cyneric was my Lord Helbrecht's idea. Conversely, going out to the gunship was my decision. I could never abide mysteries.

Mag-locked to the dead warrior's belt was a hololithic imagifier the size of a human fist. Once freed and activated, it gave rise to a flickering blue image – the ghost of another warrior in another city – wearing the heraldry of the Celestial Lions and carrying a skull-faced helm beneath one arm. Despite the wraithly image, I could see that the warrior's face was black, the black of birth on a distant jungle world. By contrast, my flesh was as white as veined marble. I had no clear memory of childhood. All I recalled of my pre-initiation infancy was howling white wind and the bite of frost on the fingers.

'Julkhara,' I greeted the hololithic ghost.

'Grimaldus,' it said, and its voice wavered the same way as the image itself. *'They lied to us about the Mannheim Gap. They sent us there to die.'*

As the recording finished in a spurt of flawed electrics, I heard the storm waiting for us outside. It was getting harder, heavier, surely more abrasive. The Imperial Guard gunship we had acquired would never make it back to the city if the weather worsened any further. This venture had already been delayed by several days, until an adequate break in the storm front.

‘Master,’ Cyneric said.

I sensed the questions coming and warded them away with a shake of my head. None of this made sense. I needed time to think.

Without a word, we emerged back into the fiercening wind, moving to the Valkyrie. Its troop bay was an orderly mess of untouched crew seats, too small for either Cyneric or myself in our armour.

‘Orders, Reclusiarch?’ came the pilot’s voice from the cockpit. The gunship jolted beneath our boots, already rising into the sky. The wind was merciless, it would be a turbulent ride home.

‘Back to the city.’

The city. *My* city. Helsreach, the hive that claimed me as its champion; the city that changed how I see my own oath of service. We are Templars, and we attack, we advance, as the last proud knights of the Great Crusade. But we were crusading for the right of mankind to exist. Our wrath must be pure, else it is worthless and futile. We are judged in life for more than the evil we destroy. We are judged for what virtues we represent, for the ideals that lie behind our blades.

I had thought I would die on this world. I was certain of it, until the very moment death came for me. The enemy entombed me beneath the fallen Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, doing me the honour of a cairn while I still drew breath. Weeks after my recovery, I thought of it in the quiet hours of each day: the privilege of such a sacred tombstone. It was almost a shame to survive.

But Armageddon didn’t kill me. We would leave the world soon – in three days I would sail with the High Marshal aboard the *Eternal Crusader,* back to war. The wounded hive I was sworn to defend had granted me its relics, and I would take them with me as we waged war across the stars.

Caution brought us in low over Helsreach. Several of the city’s districts were still in the hands of the mongrel invaders, and although the Season of Fire had forced an unwelcome cessation of hostilities, there were nonetheless forces from both sides willing to risk the breaks between dust monsoons in the hopes of bleeding their entrenched foes. Anti-air rockets were a cursed hope in the wind, but they still spat skywards at our gunships and supply landers with irritating frequency.

I heard the city-wide sirens even before we were over the fallen outer walls – another storm warning, wailing of worse to come.

Helsreach itself no longer existed as anything more than a battlefield. We had killed the city while fighting to save it. Its skyline was an amputated thing of cleaved towers and – in the rare hours the wind died down – pillars of black smoke. The central spire – modest by the standards of many hives – still stood despite extensive shelling from both sides, now home to huddled masses of stinking alien invaders taking shelter from the storms.

The true city that spread around the spire's foundations was a flattened ruin. Of the millions that had lived there a year before, perhaps a quarter yet drew breath. Most were holed up in underground bunkers, or in what precious few intact districts were still warded by the steel ring of Guard armour battalions. The city had been reinforced by huge numbers of fresh Guard soldiers, just in time to linger in a seasonal deadlock. Tens of thousands of rifles going unfired.

The pilot took us through the stumps of shattered buildings, veering between fallen habitation blocks to minimise the risk of enemy sky-fire. It also shielded us from the worst of the wind, calming the Valkyrie's judders.

Soon enough, we cut over the corpse of Stormherald, reduced to a collapsed castle of scrap and slag, spread across two city blocks. The wind had scored away all sign of Imperial loyalty upon its armour plating, and the wrecked spires of its shoulder battlements were too ruined to speak of any gothic majesty. Salvaged metal alien effigies resisted the storm – iron war banners erected by whatever foul clan flooded aboard the downed Titan at the end of its proud life.

We passed overhead, over this monument to defiance in the face of failure, and I thought of Zarha, the Crone of Invigilata, whose mangled remains lay there still. She would be rotting in the cold fluid of her life support cradle, unburied and unblessed. That injustice grieved me. Would that I could have done something to change it, but Stormherald's corpse lay deep in enemy-held territory.

Cyneric stood with me in the troop bay, watching the city roll below from the open bay door.

'By forcing the gunship out into these storms, do we abuse its machine-spirit?'

The philosophy of biomechanical life was not beyond me, but I needed Cyneric's mind on more relevant matters.

'Focus,' I told him, and his reply was a curt nod. He was learning.

We touched down on the Kruja-17-SEC landing platform – a barricaded and bunkered landing pad built over the broken straits of Hel's Highway's westernmost run. Baneblades and multiple patterns of Leman Russ front-line tanks sat in the storm, scratched bare by the wind. As the ramp slammed down, Cyneric walked away first, out into the wind and towards the closest entrance to the flakboarded forward command bunker.

The sky was black with ash and the promise of a vicious night at the mercy of the coming storm. I hesitated, looking back to the pilot, but he was already unbuckled and throwing on his environment suit for the short run to the bunker. Three months before, instinct wouldn't have told me to look back. If nothing else, I thank this world for the lessons I have learned while walking its surface.

Organised chaos reigned in the command bunker. Against the walls, cogitators, auspex relays and vox-engines clicked, ticked and pulsed. Humans scattered before us in the screen-lit darkness. Several saluted, not yet shaken from the habit; their signs of formality and respect were meaningless to me.

'I require a clean vox link to the *Eternal Crusader.'*

Officers and technicians scurried to obey. Contact with the ships in orbit was sporadic at best, and contact with the other cities was relayed through the fleet in the rare hours it functioned at all. The planetary satellite network, and the convenience of communication it brought, was naught but a memory.

One of the tech officers saluted as she came before me. 'We have a link, Reclusiarch. It should hold until the storm breaks.'

'My thanks.' A moment's attention activated my helm's own vox-reader, scanning for uncorrupted local channels. Icons flashed and chimed on the left edge of my retinal display. Three of them flickered red, then settled green.

'Reclusiarch,' came a voice half-killed by vox crackle – one of the countless Chapter serf bridge crew aboard the flagship. 'I live to serve.'

'I require four tasks completed within the hour. First, you are to make contact with every vessel of the Celestial Lions Chapter still in orbit – I need a full accounting of their war fleet. Second, contact whatever command structure remains in place at Hive Volcanus and acquire a detailed report of every Adeptus Astartes casualty in that region since the war's

commencement. Third, Cyneric and I need a gunship to return us to the *Eternal Crusader.* If the storm hits before you are able to arrange it, we will risk teleportation.'

'Your will be done, Reclusiarch. And the fourth order?'

I had to be careful.

'Make contact with the ranking officer of the Celestial Lions, garrisoned at Hive Volcanus. The transmission will be monitored, no matter what encryption processes we run. Record the following message, deliver it, and say nothing more.'

'As you command. The message, Reclusiarch?'

'Only six words. *"No pity. No remorse. No fear"*.'

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II

HIGH MARSHAL

Ten thousand years ago.

So many of our stories begin with those words. Ten thousand years ago, when the Chapters were Legions. Ten thousand years ago, when the Emperor's sons walked the stars. Ten thousand years ago when the galaxy caught fire, as though it hadn't been burning ever since.

The Adeptus Astartes are the keepers of the oldest lore, and even among our archives so much has been lost. Truth twists and warps over time, as the stories change to reflect the reader's vision. Whole swathes of the galaxy know nothing of the Heresy and the Crusade before it. Thousands of worlds pray to the Emperor not as a man, but as a god or a spirit; a warrior-avatar; a benevolent entity beyond the grave; a seasonal avatar that brings annual floods and commands the sun to rise each dawn.

Each time I return to the flagship, I find myself dwelling on the nature of truth. Our archives are among the purest in the Imperium, but even they are little more than fragments of what happened. Our reverence isn't reserved for scripture and story. When the words *ten thousand years ago* stir the blood of any Templar, it is not because of the scrolls and holorecords we have preserved through the generations. It is because of vessels like the *Eternal Crusader.*

She sailed the stars ten thousand years ago, fighting in the wars that forged our species. We walk in the footsteps of those ancient knights of the Great Crusade. We command the same vessel, train in the same chambers and bring the same wrath. When so many words have been lost, this is a truth we can cling to.

I thought all of this again that day, as Cyneric followed me from the landing bay. I could sense his uneasiness at the respect we were both shown, as well. When I had been a Chaplain, Chapter serfs would salute me. As Reclusiarch, they showed much greater reverence. We allowed our serfs to carry ceremonial weapons of their own – usually unpowered blades and daggers. They drew their swords and knelt, head down against the reversed hilt. When we passed other Templars in the dim corridors, they did not make the sign of the aquila. They crossed forearms, banging their fists to their breastplates, forming the crusader's cross.

Cyneric was still silent when we walked alone. He wasn't used to his equals showing him such elevated respect.

'The discomfort passes,' I told him. This was both true and untrue. My liege Helbrecht had told me it passed, and he was a warrior who would die before speaking a lie. The discomfort had not yet passed for me, but I trusted my lord's assurance.

The *Eternal Crusader* is a fortress in the void; it would take months to traverse if one walked every hallway and chamber. I led Cyneric through the corridors, taking the grinding elevators between decks, heedless of whether we moved through populated areas or not. My targeting reticule leapt from door to door, figure to figure, scrolling with biometric data and basic scanning lore. As we stood on one of the ascension platforms, rising up through the decks, I turned to regard Cyneric's plain, scarred features and a thought occurred to me. To my shame, it was one that should have occurred to me much earlier.

'Put your helmet back on.'

He hesitated before obeying, from surprise rather than disobedience. As it clicked into place at his collar seals, he looked back at me through the red eye-lenses of a stylised, riveted Mark VI Corvus helm. The question was within the gaze. I offered him the answer.

'You may remove it with the Chapter's lord-commanders, but never with your other brethren. You are no longer you, Cyneric. A Chaplain is the Chapter's history and its future, manifest in one man. Your features must be the deathmask of the Emperor.' I tapped the gaunt cheekbones of my helm's silver skull faceplate. 'Your brothers must forget your face, as they have forgotten mine.'

Cyneric nodded, though I sensed he was not convinced. He knew he must

use these months to prove he deserved a skull helm, but the logic of my order escaped him. After all, his helm's faceplate was not the visage of immortal death I wear. Not yet, at least.

I could have replied to his doubt by reciting a cold truth: that he still wore the helm of an Adeptus Astartes warrior, one of the Emperor's genetic descendants, and the galaxy was conquered by millions of those emotionless, impersonal masks in the era we sought to embody. If he lacked a skull helm, his warrior's visage was almost as appropriate.

But there was a time to preach, and a time to teach.

'Cyneric,' I replied. 'Behave as if you already carry the responsibilities you seek to earn.'

Another nod, less hesitant and more satisfied.

As we walked down a thoroughfare hallway, doing our mutual best to ignore the obeisance we were both shown by the human thralls, I added another warning over a shared vox channel.

'When we stand before the High Marshal, do not meet his eyes.'

More confusion. 'Master?' Cyneric voxed back.

'Just trust me.'

He waited for us in the Chamber of the First Proclamation, more often known as Sigismund's Hall. Legend tells us it was there that the first High Marshal of the Black Templars stood with the brothers who would become the first Chapter lords, looking out over the battlefield known as the Iron Cage, and swore that the Great Crusade would go on, no matter what wounds the Imperium still bore. The other Legions were free to protect mankind's domain, bearing no shame for their decision. But Sigismund's Imperial Fists would darken their armour for the battles to come, and continue their charge to carry the Emperor's message out into the void. They would not defend. They would attack. And so were born the Black Templars, the only warriors for whom the Great Crusade never ended.

Alien worlds and long-dead warriors were portrayed in paintings – each one a masterpiece rendered by a different hand – lining the dark iron walls. The statue of Sigismund himself stood as eternal guardian, flanked by sculptures of our Chapter's original marshals and castellans. Each of these bronze warriors was stained green with the patina of time, but lifted a defiant blade to the age-greyed banners hanging from the arched, gothic

ceiling.

Their armour was archaic: rough, overlapping plates in a style rarely seen even among the true successors to the Legion: those noble Chapters of the Second Founding. Outdated helmet crests marked these legendary warriors apart from those of us who had taken their place ten millennia later. One could not help but feel judged, and to wonder if we bore their legacy with the same honour they displayed in life.

The entire hall smelled of dust and the stately, stale parchment scent of old memory. At the far end awaited Helbrecht.

My liege is a man of great resolve, but equally great sorrows. His humours have ever tended towards the melancholic – not from introspection or emotion, but from ambition and devotion. His duty is never done. He cares nothing for personal glory, displays no overt offering of emotion, and spends every second of his life upon the Eternal Crusade. I have never once seen him display any emotion beyond the faintest smile, during the decades of calculated planning; the acid anger of the battlefield; and the cold rage that always follows a fight. He does not feel emotion as other sentient beings. He has mastered it.

His face is a cartographic map of wars won and scars suffered in the name of humanity's dead messiah-king. His voice is unspeakably controlled, impossibly soulful. He has seen more blood, fire, iron and hatred in life than almost any man or woman still drawing breath.

That day, he greeted me by name; one of the few among the Chapter with the rank to do so. Cyneric, he called 'Brother-Initiate', and offered a nod in the younger warrior's direction. Both of us knelt before our lord, as tradition states when first entering his presence. I prayed Cyneric had heeded my words and avoided our liege lord's eyes.

I remember thinking, so clearly, *He is warfare given human form.* No other words could describe him so completely. Armour of black and gold marked him out from the rank and file, not for exaltation but so he drew the enemy's eyes and ire. When Helbrecht pulled steel, he wanted to be seen. My lord was always the first in the fight, at the centre of the front line.

His red cloak was a brown rag, scarcely clinging to his battered, cracked war-plate. Blood had dried across his armour in rainspray flecks, doubtless in patterns of mystical relevance to the alien soothsayers and shamans among the tribes we were butchering on the surface. His bionic arm was

bared, the mechanical servos and clicking pistons doing their visible work through damaged portions of his armour. No desire had ever driven him to sheathe the limb in synthetic skin. Such meaningless cosmetic detail would never enter his mind.

'Sire,' I greeted him. Reaching up, I disengaged my helmet's seals, pulling it free to fully taste the antique air of the chamber. The Sword of the High Marshals descended to aim at my throat. My lips brushed the proffered blade in knightly obeisance, the traditional kiss to confirm one's loyalty to the Chapter and its lord-commander.

Next to me, a moment later, Cyneric did the same.

'Rise,' Helbrecht told us. He sheathed the blade at his hip – the blade that, if legend is true, was reforged from shards of our primarch's own sword. We rose as bid.

'Speak, Merek,' said my lord.

Cyneric tensed at the use of my first name.

Instead of speaking, I produced a handheld holorecorder. It projected a life-size avatar of light, an Adeptus Astartes warrior addressing all three of us.

'Grimaldus,' it said. *'They lied to us about the Mannheim Gap. They sent us there to die.'*

Helbrecht was silent after the message ran its course. He looked into the space where Julkhara's image had stood moments before and spoken of the basest treachery.

'Could this recording have been manipulated or falsified?' He didn't mean doctored by the enemy. The greenskin xenos were far too crude for such subtle measures.

I shook my head. 'The traitors Julkhara spoke of would profit nothing by such a message. I believe it to be true.'

'As do I.' Helbrecht turned back to me. 'What is it you wish, Grimaldus?'

'I am still seeking to establish contact with the Celestial Lions and take stock of their losses.'

'And you intend to destroy those who have betrayed them.'

'I doubt that will be possible, sire. No matter how much it appeals to me.'

Helbrecht looked to the statue of Sigismund, resting his hand on the pommel of his sheathed sword. The bronze replica of the First High

Marshal carried the same sword, rendered there in the same bronze as the statue itself. Sigismund stood with the blade drawn, aiming it at the wide windows, at the world that turned and burned below.

‘You risk dragging the Chapter into direct conflict with the Inquisition.’

There was no denying it. ‘Yes, sire.’

‘I do not fear that conflict, Grimaldus. Injustice must be opposed. Impurity must be purged. But the *Eternal Crusader* sets sail in three days, my brother. The warlord has fled from Armageddon and our first duty must be to hunt him down.’

I had expected that. ‘Then leave me behind.’

For the first time I could recall, surprise crossed my liege lord’s scarred features. ‘You, who were so reluctant to fight on this world, now plead to stay?’

The irony was not lost on me. ‘I can leave on another ship, sire. The *Virtue of Kings* will remain with the remnants of Amalrich’s fighting company. If I survive, I will travel with them.’

‘I lose my Reclusiarch, either way.’

‘Then promote another. The Eternal Crusade will continue without me, Helbrecht.’

It was strange to see him like that, caught between the purity of a war against external enemies, and a just war against an internal foe. He would fight both, if he could. The alien king’s death, however, took priority over all else.

‘You have been up here,’ I said, as he still looked above at the towering statue, ‘fighting the xenos in orbit. You have seen the void war with your own eyes. Tell me the reports of Celestial Lions fleet losses are wrong, sire.’

Helbrecht turned, regarding me with eyes far too old for even his war-weathered, time-cracked face.

‘The reports are true.’

It was my turn to look through the great window, at the world slowly rolling below, as Helbrecht continued. ‘They have been with us, side by side, in almost every engagement. As we speak, they have but three vessels remaining.’

‘That cannot be.’

My voice was cold, but my blood ran hot enough to boil. We were

speaking of the death of an entire Chapter. ‘How can they have sustained such losses?’

My liege has never been a man prone to even flashes of humour. He took a breath that could not quite be called a sigh. This war had enraged and wearied him in equal measure, and now the final blow was ready to fall; I brought him the threat of another delay.

‘Their devastation is the principal reason I believe your concerns are valid,’ he said. ‘You know the ebb and flow of void war: the endless relay of orders; the voices in the murk; the shouting above cannonfire and the thundering flames of structural damage. Hundreds and hundreds of ships moving in every imaginable angle – firing, ramming, crashing, dying. Facts and fiction twine together.’

But Helbrecht was a void commander without parallel. That was why he had been chosen to oversee the Imperium’s forces in orbit. I knew his words were not an excuse for a personal failing. Unfortunately, neither were they an apology for him consigning me to Helsreach with the wider war taking place up here. I was no longer bitter about it, merely regretful at the moments of brotherhood I missed.

‘I know,’ I nodded.

‘The Lions have fought well,’ he allowed. ‘I would never cast aspersions on their fighting character. Their straits have arisen from apparent ill fortune: orders given but never received, or too slowly answered. We have had many reports of vox breakage and orders never reaching their warship’s captains. Much of it reeks of enemy guile.’

I had to hear this. ‘Tell me.’

‘The battle-barge *Serenkai* was boarded and overwhelmed when it pulled free of our spearhead, failing to heed orders to maintain formation. The cruiser *Lavi* took four hours to die from structural haemorrhage when it collided with the wounded Flesh Tearers flagship *Victus*. The *Nubica* destroyed itself when it was boarded, choosing sacrifice over capture.’

He listed another dozen ships, another dozen deaths. My teeth clenched harder with each name.

‘It is difficult,’ he finished, ‘to know what events were born of sabotage or treachery, rather than honest battle. It has been eventful in Armageddon’s skies, brother. And those who might have borne closer witness are in their graves. If the Inquisition moves against the Lions, it is doing so with a

tenacity and subtlety I have rarely seen from its agents.’

‘Nevertheless, we are left with a Chapter devoid of its fleet, with its remnants annihilated on the surface.’

Helbrecht closed his eyes, musing in solemn silence for several beats of my heart. When they opened again, all doubt was banished. This was how he always acted, and I admired him greatly for it. A man of action, not reaction. He attacked, always attacked.

‘Justice calls to us,’ he said.

A Chaplain should not smile, for we are avatars of morbid rituals and righteous death in battle. I could not help it. My blood caught fire with his words, the way it does in those holiest of moments: when he declares a Crusade.

‘At the very least, we must learn the truth of this matter,’ he said, and both Cyneric and I were already making the crusader’s cross over our breastplates.

‘As you say, sire.’

‘Go to Hive Volcanus,’ he told us. ‘The bulk of the Chapter must sail in three days, Grimaldus. The Old Man requires it, and the arch-warlord responsible for Armageddon cannot be allowed to flee from our grasp, for retribution calls as loud as justice. We cannot commit the Templars to the field again and endure another week or more of recovery, rearming and resupply. But make planetfall and learn the truth of what happened down there. If the Lions are destined to die, I would hear the truth of their tale before it is too late.’

‘It will be done.’

‘I have no doubt.’

He did not ask me if three days would be enough. There was no choice: it *had* to be enough. ‘Do you require more knights?’

I glanced to Cyneric. ‘No, my liege. Not yet.’

‘Good, for we have few to spare. Three days,’ he said again. ‘Go. Cut to the truth and cry it to the sky.’

Cyneric was silent as we left. His quiet was actually a disquiet: a silence born of words unspoken, rather than a need to say nothing at all. Few human serfs walked those austere decks, but both of our helmets clicked back into place. My vision was washed with red-tinted target locks and

streaming bio-data.

‘You looked into his eyes.’ It was not a question.

Cyneric nodded. ‘I did.’

‘I warned you not to.’

He nodded again. ‘You did.’

I knew what he was feeling. He felt as I always did before the statues of our Chapter’s legendary forefathers. He had passed beneath Judgement Incarnate. How best to explain this to him?

‘Our liege has seen everything the galaxy can offer, on both sides of reality’s veil. He has killed every enemy imaginable and has stood in the ranks of countless Crusades. And he is not a subtle man. He wears his victories and defeats as plainly displayed as any scar. You feel as if your worth was being weighed, and that is only right. He was measuring you, as he measures everything and everyone that falls beneath his gaze. Helbrecht has old, keen eyes that see right into a warrior’s heart. I do not know him well, for no one outside his Sword Brethren can claim to know our lord well, but trust me when I say he did not find you wanting, Cyneric.’

Cyneric mused on this as we walked through the dark halls. ‘Never have I felt more judged than when my eyes met his.’

‘He is the heir of Sigismund and the avatar of the Eternal Crusade. It is right to doubt you will ever live up to his life’s legacy, just as it is right to be inspired by him in the same breath. High Marshal Helbrecht finds you worthy. You are with me now on our lord’s wishes. He asked that I judge you for initiation into the Chaplain Brotherhood.’

I heard the servos purr in Cyneric’s neck as he turned to regard me. ‘You did not request me yourself?’

The very idea.

‘No, Cyneric. I did not.’

‘It was spoken among the brethren that you were seeking to rebuild your command squad.’

Artarion. Priamus. Cador. Nerovar. Bastilan.

‘Then it was spoken wrong,’ I replied. ‘Let that be the end of it, Cyneric.’

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III

THE LAST OFFICER

The Codex Astartes – at least, the *Eternal Crusader*'s incomplete copy of that ancient text – detailed several thousand logistical concerns in the preparation, establishment and fortification of an Adeptus Astartes firebase. Humanity did not invest so much into us in order that we should grind frontline to frontline in protracted theatres of war – that is the purview of the Imperial Guard. The Adeptus Astartes are the falling hammer, the spear to the vitals, striking and withdrawing with the force of a killing thrust to the heart.

But no plan survives contact with the enemy. Fortification and digging in during extensive worldwide Crusades are a necessity of the wars we fight. While the Templars may not cling to the Codex Astartes with a tenacity bordering on worship of holy scripture, it is still the most comprehensive treatise on Space Marine warfare ever written, penned by the hand of the Emperor's own son, Lord Guilliman of Macragge. Its value is immeasurable to any commander, no matter what divergences are found in a Chapter's culture.

It is said that no complete copies still exist in the Dark Millennium. Even the original document's origins are shrouded in more myth than truth. No records even exist as to whether Lord Guilliman wrote the Codex by hand across several dozen tomes, dictated it to nuncio-processors and servitor scribes, or compiled it himself into a hololithic library.

There it is again, of course. *Ten thousand years ago,* when we were not forced to rely on flawed records and fractured accounts.

The Season of Fire raged hottest and hardest on Armageddon Secundus,

the easternmost landmass, where Hive Helsreach and its sister cities drowned in the storms of dust. On the west coast of the continent Armageddon Prime, Hive Volcanus was still besieged by the enemy and the winds were more often free of the burning sand and ash that so blighted the other side of the world.

The Celestial Lions firebase was atop a natural rise in the landscape, supremely defensible, with great battlements and sacred statuary of fallen heroes staring down at any who would dare bring the fight to those dark walls. Turret-defended bunkers within the compound sat beneath barricaded landing pads, which in turn stood above repair foundries, vehicle garages and arming barracks.

The whole site was already in ruin. We heard Volcanus on the wind, as the wind brought the faint sounds of battle from kilometres away.

Walking through the ruined structures, I almost expected to see corpses. The attackers were long gone, and those that died here had been given over to funeral pyres outside the walls weeks ago. Three Thunderhawks, sandblasted but still golden, rested on the northern landing platforms. Along the edge of my retinal display, an open vox link cycled through channels, seeking a connection.

‘Reclusiarch Grimaldus,’ spoke a voice over the vox. ‘You honour us with your presence.’

We walked on, drawing near to the stilted platforms, ascending to the launch deck on crew ladders. Using elevators and servitors piloting lifter-Sentinels, twenty Celestial Lions were plundering their own firebase’s supplies, loading up their Thunderhawks with brutal efficiency. The warriors themselves hauled crates of ammunition between them, every one of them keeping at least one hand free to reach for a bolter at a second’s notice. It was a clean, impressive resupply, even if it bore a few furtive resemblances to a less-noble looting.

One of the Space Marines came forward, bearing the black helm of a Pride Leader. He knelt, though he had no true reason to do so, and removed the dark helmet. The face beneath was the warm, rich brown of humans born to equatorial climes, with cultures dependent on the teeming jungle and expansive savannah. I had never been to the Lions home world of Elysium IX, but I had met many of its dark-skinned sons. A culture of hunters: proud people from birth to death.

This warrior's face was lined with the faint cracks of age. A Chapter veteran, no doubt. His lack of mutilating scars did him great credit.

'I do not know you,' I prompted.

'Pride Leader Ekene Dubaku.' He rose to his feet, the unnecessary honour complete. 'I lead those of us who remain.'

Pride Leader. A squad sergeant. This did not bode well.

'Grimaldus,' I replied. 'Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade. Cousin, when you say you lead those who remain…'

Ekene took my prompt again. 'There are ninety-six Lions still drawing breath upon this world, Reclusiarch. I inherited command from Warleader Vakembei, he of the Spear That Hunts Hearts. He walked into the Emperor's embrace eighteen days ago.'

'I knew Captain Vakembei. The Imperium will miss his blade, and his wisdom. What of Brother-Chaplain Julkhara?'

'Deathspeaker Julkhara is dead to the kine, slain twenty-four days past.'

'The kine,' I said, without inflection.

'The greenskins, Reclusiarch. Cattle. Beasts. *Kine*.'

Disrespect of the enemy should be punished, but it was not my place to chastise them for their hatreds, nor would it be wise to annihilate morale by passing judgement against them for such petty transgressions.

The Lions kept working, alongside the trundling stomp of Sentinel loaders. At my gesture, Cyneric joined them, assisting with their loading.

'This looks more like looting than resupply, Dubaku.'

He replaced his helm, speaking through the vox-grille. 'We have little choice, since it was overrun. Our fallback stronghold is within Volcanus itself, but we risk raids out here every three days. Ammunition is low – production and resupply from our fleet has dropped to almost nothing.'

For a moment, I wondered why they had not requested aid from the other Chapters, but Dorn's blood runs thick in the veins of his descendants. It was difficult to lay pride aside, even in the face of devastation. Especially then, for when else was a warrior truly tested? What other time could be finer for proving that a man is strong enough to stand alone?

Dubaku continued. 'We have swallowed our pride long enough to request aid from the Flesh Tearers and the Black Templars, but the former are as depleted as we are, and the latter are preparing to set sail. Your brothers are taking the fight out into the stars, Reclusiarch. We have no right to beg for

scraps while being left behind. So we exist by plundering our fallen fortress and looting our own dead.’

So Julkhara’s summons had been a personal one. It had still cost him dearly to send it, I was certain.

We moved aside as another three modified Sentinel walkers clanked past, bearing aquila-marked crates in their industrial claws.

I was struck by one thing above all: the Celestial Lions were dead. While a hundred yet remained, they operated now without a single voice from their Chapter’s high command, and their ranking veteran officer was a squad sergeant. I had hoped to find Julkhara. I had hoped to find *hope*.

‘Finish your loading,’ I told Dubaku. ‘Once we are aboard the gunship, speak to me of everything that happened since you first made planetfall. Then I will judge how best to answer Julkhara’s last words.’

Dubaku saluted, making the sign of the aquila over the winged Imperialis on his breastplate.

‘The Deathspeaker vowed that you would come.’

I did not reply. I merely gestured for him to get back to work. It remained to be seen just what Julkhara truly expected of me, or what I could actually achieve here. It already felt less like I was summoned to save the Lions, and more like I was called to hold a vigil, watching over them as they died.

Nine hundred and eighty-three warriors. They had brought nine hundred and eighty-three warriors to this world, and ninety-six remained.

We rode in restraint thrones in the gunship’s dimly lit crew bay. The Celestial Lions had removed their helms, though Cyneric and I left ours in place.

Ekene’s tale was a grim one.

Their entire Chapter had landed here, but for the most remote uninitiated training forces, spread across the segmentum.

Before dawn over the Mannheim Gap, they had been on the surface for three months and sixteen days, defending Hive Volcanus on the west coast of Armageddon Prime.

In that span of time, all of which was spent bolter-to-blade in the city’s burning streets, they suffered casualties far, far in advance of any other Chapter. Everywhere they fought, the enemy struck back in overwhelming numbers. Countless times they were deployed to reinforce elements of the

Imperial Guard that were already long dead by the time the Lions arrived, leaving the Space Marines deep in enemy territory without easy withdrawal.

On at least fifteen catalogued occasions, they were ordered to advance on specific critical objectives, only to find themselves alone without the planned support forces or the promised reinforcements.

Casualties mounted, operation after operation, day by day. Ambushes were common, even on routine patrols through pacified territory. The Lions were assigned to hold crucial districts and sectors, and accordingly moved in force to cover all necessary ground. Yet they found their patrols being hit harder than any orbital intelligence had predicted possible. The enemy would appear in numbers undreamed, rising from ambushes in sectors that were recorded as being most viciously cleansed beforehand.

They were granted orbital picts and auspex-scrye readouts from Hive Command, only to find their intelligence scarcely matched the embattled realities of their deployment zones. Time and again, the Lions jumped into the fire. What choice was there? They would not allow the city to fall. They could not allow the enemy to live.

It did not take long for them to rely first and foremost on their own scanners and Scouts, but their equipment suffered unexpected deteriorations and frequent jamming; their Scouts often fell silent while out in the city alone. Sometimes, the Lions would find their Scouts' bodies. Usually, they would not.

Pict-feeds from their vessels in orbit were distorted from the void war playing out above, but those rare, wrecked visual clues were the most reliable intelligence they could muster. The Lions swore by them, thanking the thrall-captains of their warships for any and all devoted efforts. But these also grew more infrequent as their fleet was massacred in the sky. Less than a month into the campaign, rearming runs from orbit began to grow as rare as reliable intelligence. Celestial Lions drop-ships were destroyed high in the atmosphere on two occasions, and on another, Volcanus's own wall-guns malfunctioned and destroyed an incoming shipment, blowing seven loaded Thunderhawks out of the sky.

Never once did Ekene's voice crack as he told me of these misfortunes; never once did he sigh, or glance away, or lament at what had come to be. Contained within him was a deep, nourishing well of resolve that did credit to any son of Dorn.

It only made my blood run colder with each revealed betrayal, that such a fate had befallen my cousins.

My hands must have been clenched for some time, for Ekene hesitated in his retelling, gesturing to where I gripped the arms of the restraint throne.

‘Reclusiarch?’

I forced my muscles to unlock. ‘Continue.’

And continue he did.

Mere weeks into the war, half the Chapter lay dead, the names of the slain added each dawn to the rolls of honour. The survivors fought on.

Decades ago, in the Last War, Hive Volcanus fell quickly to the greenskin horde. Like carrion crows, the enemy picked over the city’s bones and went to war with the looted spoils of Imperial manufactories. There would be no repeat of such shameful history this time. The city’s lords and leaders made that clear at each command briefing, leaving the Lions to make their demands into defiant reality. All the while, the city burned. It burned but did not fall.

Then came Mannheim.

The Mannheim Gap was a canyon running through the mountains north of Hive Volcanus. A rent in this planet’s priceless earth, torn open by the slow, active dance of the world’s tectonics. Any who dwell here for more than a handful of weeks know that Armageddon is not a world that sleeps easy, whether due to groundquakes, dust storms, or yet another war.

The Lions were told the canyon had to be assaulted, for there lay a nest of mechanical heresy, where the aliens were forgebreeding their scrap iron god-machines. Volcanus’s forces had to strike before the alien Titans became active, or the tide would forever turn against the city’s defenders. The Guard could not be trusted to deal such a surgical strike, nor could the city organise a mass withdrawal and redeployment of its deeply entrenched Guard elements to make it a plausible option. It had to be Space Marines. It had to be the Lions.

Primitive void shielding protected the site from orbital bombardment. The Lions had to strike overland, without drop pods, marching into the ravine alongside their tanks, attacking in battalion regiments like some echo of the Heresy and the millennia of crude warfare before it.

The Lions reconnoitred, of course. They scouted and watched, deeming Imperial intelligence reliable. None of the alien god-walkers were infused

with life.

But time was not on their side. Every hour they spent behind their fortress walls was another hour that brought the Gargant machines closer to awakening.

Five hundred Lions attacked. The last half of the Chapter went to war, knowing that the enemy numbers were beyond the capability of the Guard to confront. They chose to bring overwhelming force, to strike fast and hard, countering their crippling inability to strike from the skies.

Five hundred Space Marines. I have taken whole worlds with a quarter of that number. Even though human resistance and greenskin forces are impossible to compare, five hundred Adeptus Astartes warriors is an overwhelming weapon in any imaginable reckoning. The Lions commanders were right to commit their full fury. Any Chapter Master would do the same. There was no possible way the enemy could have known such a force was coming to destroy them, and there is simply no way to prepare for *five hundred* Space Marine warriors.

Strike with choking ferocity. Destroy the enemy. Fall back before getting entrenched in a full-scale battle. It should have worked.

The Season of Fire was still weeks away when they charged, but dragon's breath in the air already heralded the storms to come. Gritty, stinking air howled down the canyon as the Lions advanced behind their Warleaders and Deathspeakers. I could picture it so clearly, down to their banners tearing in the wind.

Along the canyon's walls, huge industrial rigging rose against the rock: great construction yard platforms, as the greenskin beasts built their iron avatars higher and higher. Hundreds of them, never of uniform size, each one a bloated, scrap-fleshed icon to foul gods, crawling with screaming aliens.

Still. Five hundred Space Marines…

'When did you realise you had been betrayed?' I asked.

Ekene took a breath before replying. 'It did not take long.'

'The Gargants,' Cyneric interjected. 'They were active.'

Ekene gave a bitter laugh, sharp as a gunshot. 'If that was all we had to deal with, we might still have fought our way clear without being slaughtered. We might even have won, despite dying to the last man.'

He was more solemn as he continued, letting the tale reach its inevitable

conclusion. The Gargants were not sleeping, they were waiting. Searing heat spread through the canyon from the solid fuel burners deep in the alien Titans' bellies – beneath the crash of bolters and the cracking rattle of alien rifles, came the clank of gears, with the landslide grind of coal and scrap being fed into the Gargants' heartfires. Great guns whined downward on protesting joints, while the ground shook with each newborn Gargant's first steps.

The Lions gold battle tanks raged skywards, streams of lascannon fire bursting thin shields and scoring holes in the hulls of towering enemy war machines. Warleaders shouted orders, in control of their warriors even in the heat of the battle, establishing where to strike, where to push through the orks' lines, where to move in defence of tank battalions threatened by enemy infantry.

My heart soared at his words. Even when the Gargants awoke, Ekene and his brothers – the last half of a noble Chapter – were still fighting to win. They would purge the canyon at the cost of their own lives. Dorn himself would have stood with them that day.

But the tide truly turned. As Ekene described this latest twist of fate, Cyneric leaned forward in his restraint throne, scarcely believing what he was hearing.

The enemy ambush unfolded further. Greenskins spilled from the earth, pouring in hordes from warrens within the canyon sides and the rocky ground. Thousands of them, roaring beneath fanged war banners and standards made from crucified Lions taken in other battles. This fresh army surged into the ravine, filling it like sand in an hourglass, blocking all hope of withdrawal and eliminating any chance of victory.

'They knew we were coming,' said Ekene. 'What other reason could there be to bury whole war-clans under the rock, waiting for such an assault? They knew we were coming. Their overlord was a beast clad in scrapwork armour – the biggest greenskin we had ever seen. He ate the dead: his own, and ours. Captain Vularakh buried the war-sword Je'hara in the beast's belly and carved three metres of stinking alien guts free. It did nothing. We fought as we fell back, but we knew we were betrayed.'

I could not argue with that. A traitor, somewhere, had fed word to the enemy, and the orks made the most of their ambush. Five hundred Space Marines could take a star system. At Mannheim, they had barely been able

to escape alive. It was difficult to imagine the sea of alien flesh necessary to butcher so many of mankind's finest, but having seen the ocean of greenskins spilling over the plains towards the walls of Helsreach only months before, I had a fairly clear frame of reference.

'That is not all.' Ekene gave a grim smile. 'Sniper fire, brutally accurate, rained down from the canyon walls. I am not speaking of the solid shell rattle of greenskin projectile throwers. I know how these aliens fight, Reclusiarch. This was viciously precise laser weaponry, knifing through our officers' helms from above. Warleader Dakembe, shot through the throat. Spiritwalker Azadah, taken before he could unleash his powers, his skull blown open by two crossing las-shots an arm's length away from me. Deathspeakers, Warleaders, Spiritwalkers… even Pride Leaders, cut down with fire too precise, too clinical, to be the enemy.'

He paused, and I could see in his eyes that he was no longer seeing the gunship bay around us. He was seeing his brothers die at Mannheim – some to crude iron blades rending through ceramite, others to spikes of white-hot las-fire lancing down into the ravine.

'It took four hours to fight free. We carved our way back the way we came, abandoning a sea of dead tanks, slain brothers and butchered enemy bodies. The gene-seed of half our Chapter lies rotting at the bottom of that canyon, unharvested by our Apothecaries and defiled by the thousands of foes we left alive. We *fled,'* he made the word into a spat curse, 'from the field, and the most valiant battle the Celestial Lions ever fought was in that retreat. Never had we faced such odds. The last of us cut our way free, pulled our brothers from the storm of blades and fell back to our fortress with the enemy at our heels.'

'The fortress fell,' I said quietly.

'That implies we even had a chance to defend it.' Ekene shook his head. 'The xenos flooded it before most of our survivors had even arrived. We had to fight just to escape our own falling fortress. Even then, for every gunship that raced free, another two were shot down in flames.'

'Throne of the Emperor,' Cyneric swore softly.

Ekene nodded. 'Our survivors returned to Volcanus. We had three officers left at dusk of that day, three officers above the rank of Pride Leader. Deathspeaker Julkhara, who called you a brother, Reclusiarch; Warleader Vakembei, the last captain; and Lifebinder Kei-Tukh, our last Apothecary.

The Chapter's future rested on his skills. And can you guess the final insult, Reclusiarch? The last gasp in this drama of shame and treachery?'

I wanted facts, not my own speculation. 'Say it,' I said.

Ekene smiled. 'Our territory inside the city walls was a cold foundry, nearly lightless, with a perimeter of rockcrete patrolled by our remaining warriors. Kei-Tukh did not survive the first night. We found him at dawn, slouched against our last Land Raider, shot through the eye-lens. The gene-seed he had carried was gone, and he would harvest no more. So now you see the depths of our plight, Reclusiarch. We have lost our fleet, our armoury, our officers and almost all hope of rebuilding our Chapter. We cannot even cling to pride, after the shame of retreat. All that remains to us is the truth. We must survive long enough to speak it. The Imperium must know what happened here.'

I wanted to tell him the Imperium would know. I wanted to reassure him that his entire bloodline had not died in vain. I meant to say it, yet the words that left my lips were more instinctive, and somehow more honest.

'You mean to die on this world.'

Ekene's dark lips curved into another sickle-smile. 'Of course. We will die alongside our brothers, as it should be. Deathspeaker Julkhara wished you to know the truth behind our coming last stand, and ensure those that share our primarch's blood never speak ill of our fall.'

I said nothing. They had asked me to come, but I would decide just what my involvement would be.

Cyneric leaned forward, and his helm's vox-speakers couldn't quite steal the passion from his voice. 'You have to return to Elysium. Endure the shame if you must, as the Crimson Fists endured their shame. You have to rebuild your Chapter – the galaxy must not lose the Lions forever.'

'Elysium? Brother-knight, the Chapter is savaged beyond resurrection. Men, materiel, knowledge… All of it is gone. We have nothing to hand down to any generation that would follow us. You advocate cowardice to fuel false hope?'

'I advocate *survival*.' Cyneric snarled the words. 'Survival to preserve precious blood, and to rise again to fight another day. I hope to die in glory, as any son of Rogal Dorn. But even in our legends of the primarch, when he bled his warriors to purify them, he never let them taste annihilation. Sometimes, the more virtuous path is to carry the shame and survive.'

I looked between them both. The truth was that there was no wrong answer here. No right answer, either. A glorious last stand was no more or less respectable than preserving the infinite value of a Space Marine Chapter. One would earn more glory, no doubt. The other would better serve mankind. I appreciated Ekene's zeal to finish what he began, and die with unbroken loyalty alongside his brothers.

But I also appreciated Cyneric's surprising wisdom, to preserve the Chapter's soul at the cost of carrying personal shame. Few Templars would commit to such a burden. It spoke well of him that he had the insight to consider both paths, but I wondered if he would advocate shame if he were the one facing the prospect of so glorious a last stand. Easier to speak of shame than to survive it.

In the minutes of silence that followed, we touched down in Hive Volcanus. Whatever solution arose from all this had to appease the Lions' hot-blooded need for vengeance at Mannheim, as well as their cold-blooded need to be vindicated by spreading word of their betrayal. Both were essential, and both would see the Celestial Lions wiped clear from the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes.

And yet, the Chapter also had to survive.

As we disembarked, Cyneric opened a vox channel, speaking so the Lions would not hear.

'One question plagues me, Reclusiarch.'

I could guess. 'You would ask how this all began – what the Lions did in the past to earn this fate.'

'Every vendetta has a source, does it not?'

'True. And the truth here is a bleak one, dating back decades. The Lions are being punished now for trying to tell the truth fifty years ago.'

'I do not understand.'

We made our way across the landing pad, and how glorious it was to see a city skyline that was still intact. Volcanus had endured a lesser siege than Helsreach, with many more defenders manning its walls. The central spire was an ugly monolith that lived up to the name *hive*, with anaemic industrial sectors and transit stations spread around its wide foundations. Most of the city's manufactories were protected in the hive tower's shell, making life wretched for its citizens who were forced to live shut inside with the fumes of their own forge fires eternally tainting the ventilation. It

meant, however, that the city was monumentally harder to take than Helsreach, and with no central highway, the enemy could not simply run free through the city's core.

'Every Chapter carries a thousand secrets of past wars, unabsolved shames and slights against its honour. This is not the first time that the Lions have dealt with the Inquisition.'

'Julkhara's recording,' Cyneric replied. 'He spoke of the "echoes of Khattar".'

'Khattar is the world where this pathetic grudge began. It is where the Inquisition first betrayed the Celestial Lions.' I finally turned from the Volcanus skyline, watching the Lions unloading their gunships. 'You could argue, as other Chapters have argued upon hearing this rumour, that it was also where the Lions damned themselves by their own naivety.'

That gave Cyneric pause. 'You admire them, but consider them naive?'

'Anyone who trusts an agent of the Inquisition has earned the right to be named naive, Cyneric. There is a reason the Adeptus Astartes stand apart from the Imperium – autonomous; loyal to the empire's ideals, but rarely its function. The Lions' most grievous error was forgetting that.'

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IV

STORIES AT THE FIRE

The Inquisition does not exist.

It does not exist in the sense many Imperial citizens believe – as a cohesive, interlinked cobweb of organised power. Individual men and women are granted immunity from all persecution and autonomy from all law. They are granted that most nebulous of virtues: *authority.* Everything else comes down to what they achieve, and what personal power they amass. When an inquisitor calls upon Imperial resources, he or she relies on the threat of authority, rather than any real organisation lending support to their needs. Their power is both utterly real and a cunning illusion, all at once.

Men and women with wildly differing ideologies, tactics and goals do exist, and they are invested with ultimate authority, but that is not a collective enemy we could face and fight. Inquisitors will often ally together, but rarely permanently. Even their precious ordos are lines of alignment, philosophies of specialisation and intent, not armies of organised allegiance.

They are, in all ways, the exact opposite of the Adeptus Astartes. Our temporal authority has been stripped back since the Heresy, yet we are essential to the Imperium and need no illusions of commanding great power. Our war fleets and brotherhoods speak for themselves.

Given the nature of the war, Armageddon’s cities were fairly thick with warbands of Ordo Xenos agents and their militant ilk, but to move against the Inquisition was to move against a colony of vermin. Trap one rat and it may still mean nothing to the nest. Any number of the inquisitors involved

in the war would have nothing to do with the Lions' persecution, and care little if they even knew what was being done to the Chapter. I could not simply approach the closest Inquisitorial representative and demand he reveal what he knew, for the chances were that he would know nothing.

Time was my worst enemy, for it was not on our side. I needed to cut right to the heart of the matter, but the Inquisition was not a beast with one heart. Every Inquisitorial warband was its own sovereign entity.

Few Chapters knew of what happened at Khattar, and even fewer ever spoke of it. Of those that were aware of the planet's annihilation, I would wager that most did not regard it as a true threat to the autonomy of the Adeptus Astartes, preferring to focus on their own concerns and their own wars. As for the others, I can only speak of the Black Templars with any conviction, and even our Chapter is more akin to several dozen individual Crusade fleets with their own goals and traditions, united in lineage rather than united side by side.

What little I knew of Khattar came down to a conflict of pride and duty between the Lions and their Inquisitorial allies – the kind of conflict that takes place a thousand times each year across the Imperium's vast spread of worlds. Many of these disagreements turn to bloodshed; what made the Lions' situation so galling was that they had reacted with a measure of composure and reason, when they had every right to draw their bolters and finish it in a blunter, more efficient manner.

The Lions are a Chapter of storytellers and saga-singers. As the sun set over the besieged city walls, we remained in the outlying industrial sector, circled by tanks in the Lions' makeshift armoury at the heart of a powered-down foundry. Beneath the rumble of growling, idling engines, I could almost hear the ghosts whispering among the bare bolter racks and empty ammunition crates.

We had agreed to speak of Khattar. I had the story of how my cousins had paid a butcher's bill since coming to Armageddon. Now I wished to know what had happened before.

Seven Lions had gathered – the survivors of Ekene's own squad – while the others prepared for the final assault to come, or patrolled on sentry duty. Cyneric was aiding them; I thought the experience of living among another Chapter would aid his perspective.

The air was charged with the expectation of attack, even this deep in an

Imperial-held city. It left a foul taste in my mouth.

So I sat around a wreckage-fire with Ekene and his proud Lions, the firelight sending amber shadows dancing across our armour. This was how they had told tales on Elysium, though their savannah campfires would be set out under the stars, not beneath the arched ceiling of an abandoned manufactory.

‘You first,’ Ekene prompted me.

I did not understand, and said as much.

‘You first,’ he repeated. ‘You have come to our hearth and home. Tradition states the first tale must be yours.’

‘Outsiders always speak first,’ one of the other warriors said. ‘It is how they pay for their food and rest at a tribe’s camp.’

‘I have no stories.’

The Lions chuckled.

‘Everyone has stories,’ one of them said.

‘Tell us of Helsreach,’ said Ekene.

‘No.’ The word came out as sharp as a bolt shot, and they tensed at the suddenness of my reply. I had no desire to speak of Helsreach. The lessons I had learned were still scoring themselves on my soul.

They accepted my refusal with shared glances and murmured agreement, but a warrior with the name Jaur-Kem etched on his breastplate cleared his throat in almost amusing human politeness.

‘Reclusiarch,’ he said. ‘Tell us the tale of how you earned a Deathspeaker’s grin.’

I felt a strange discomfort creeping down my backbone. ‘The events of the Pelegeron Cluster are recorded in any number of accessible archives.’

The Lions laughed again, though there was no mockery in it. They were far too wise to insult a Chaplain, even one of other allegiance. Their laughter was for the many difficulties in two Chapters trying to share time in companionship, and the endless differences Space Marines of divergent bloodlines always faced in such moments.

‘Official records are dry and lifeless things, Reclusiarch.’ Ekene gestured in encouragement. ‘Tell us what happened through your eyes. You would do us great honour.’

I looked between them, from one face to the next, gunsight reticules chiming and unfocusing as they identified null targets.

‘Very well.’ I took a calming breath. ‘There is an ancient saying, a sentiment wedded to humanity’s bones, I think, for it emerges from countless cultures with slightly different phrasing each time. My mentor, Reclusiarch Mordred, despised it, saying its very core ran counter to the precepts of the Eternal Crusade, but I always enjoyed its funereal poetry. “*There will never be a war to end all wars*”.’

The Lions spoke in agreement. They had a similar sentiment on their home world.

‘On the fourth world of the Pelegeron system,’ I said, ‘they believed the opposite was true. Their sedition became secession, and their rebellion became war. “The Last War”, they called it. The “war to end all wars”. If they could throw the Imperium back with enough defiance, then mankind’s empire would let them drift away in peace, to live as they wished in the filth of their heresy. They truly believed this.’

Strange, how fierce the memories felt as they came back. There is always such bestial comfort in sweat and screaming rage.

‘Imagine a fortress formed from a most diseased mind,’ I said. ‘The capital of a world at the whim of tectonic rage, on one of the few landmasses stable enough to inhabit. Imagine this world’s priceless rock made living among lava rivers a necessity for hundreds of thousands of mining settlers, but the planet itself still cringes back from all human touch. That is Pelegeron IV, cousins. That is what it was like. A world only half-formed, still writhing in protracted birth throes, with magma for blood and smoke for air.’

Ekene was smiling. ‘You are a better tale-teller than you give yourself credit for, Deathspeaker Grimaldus.’

I was warming to the idea, myself. It was not so different from giving declarations of judgement, or reciting the Litanies of Hate.

‘This final fortress was called Apex, as was the volcano within which it was built. Few geological archives have ever chronicled a volcano to match the scale of Apex, for the mountain eclipsed even the Olympus forge-peak on Sacred Mars. Apex was a boil on Pelegeron’s crust, the size of lesser continents on saner worlds, with its infected roots digging all the way to the world’s core. In times of peace, the Imperium hollowed it out, and drilled ever deeper. When war came, it became the enemy cult’s final fortress. We had to strike at their last bastion before they could seal themselves inside.’

‘You said the foe called it the Last War,’ one of the Lions interrupted.

‘What did your black knights call it?’

‘The Vinculus Crusade,’ I replied. ‘And it ended at the Battle of Fire and Blood. Many archives record the final duel between Vinculus himself and the arch-heretic atop the cathedral.’ I shook my head. ‘It never happened. But when has the truth ever mattered to Imperial chroniclers?’

That earned a few grim laughs. I barely acknowledged them. I could feel the heat again. The insane heat of those final hours under the mountain.

‘Though the volcano had great transit vents wide enough for tankers and cargo haulers to drift in and out of the mountain’s industrial chambers, they had been sealed and shielded from aerial attack for weeks. It left us facing an assault on the main thoroughfare gate, despite the impossibility of landing an army there.’

I looked to each of the warriors with me, unsure if I was doing justice to the day itself. They listened, paying full heed to my words.

‘I stood among the Sword Brethren of High Marshal Ludoldus at the assault’s vanguard. We had to hold the fortress gate while the rest of the army marched up the mountainside. With no room to deploy in force at the gate, the Sisters of the Bloody Rose Order and our own brothers landed at stable plateaux and struggled up the rockslides from there. The vanguard deployed by drop pod, through atmosphere thick enough to choke a man without a rebreather. Thirty of us. Thirty knights – the High Marshal’s chosen.’

I met the Lions’ eyes, though they saw nothing but my eye-lenses. ‘That was how it began. *Hold the gate,* our liege lord demanded of us. *Hold until the others reach us*. Nothing more.’

He wants to vent his anger, but lacks even the breath to shout. Weary rage pulls at his limbs, miring him with its sluggish caress. Never has he felt so drained, so leeched of all vitality. War has become work – an exhausting slaughterhouse chore, reduced to the rise and fall of blades, with the push and pull of burning muscles.

Slain foes blanket the rocky ground in every direction. His brothers, those still standing, fight behind a barricade of armoured enemy dead. The shrieking madmen that come against the knights know nothing of fear. They spend their lives like copper coins, charging in a screaming horde.

‘Ai-ai-aiiiiiii,’ the bastards keep shrieking as they run to the butchers’

blades. ‘Ai-ai-aiiiiii.’

The knight hears his liege lord above the chaos. Not shouting orders, for no orders are needed when there’s nothing to do but fight or die. Neither is he crying defiance, for the knights’ refusal to run is defiance enough. No, he hears his lord – that golden warrior – laughing.

It is Ludoldus’s way. The High Marshal stands with one boot on the barricade of bodies, his ancestral sword swinging and spearing down in a ceaseless blur of charged steel. Laughing in the heat of battle-fever.

By contrast, Grimaldus barely has the breath to curse. The knight’s chainsword sings for him, its snarls switching between the roar of whirring teeth and the meat-muted growl of carving through human flesh.

Down the mountainside, the Imperial army hauls itself higher. At the main gate, the cultist-soldiers of Pelegeron, faced with their rebellion’s collapse, are no longer fighting for their twisted truth. They are fighting to survive, and they are losing. Their cities are in dust. Their stronghold endures siege.

Then it comes. That moment, disgustingly sharp and impossible to predict, when the defenders are no longer defending at all, but fighting a retreat. It’s a change in the toxic air, a divergence from the angry cries that rise from any army like an aural tide. Everything is different without any real warning, but it spreads the way fire devours a bracken forest. It is no longer a fighting retreat, but a rout. The defenders are broken, and the slaughter begins as they turn and flee. Soldiers who had faced the invaders with fanatical pride only moments before now die with their wounds on their backs. To the knight’s eyes, there is no surer testament to a coward’s death.

Grimaldus fights at his lord’s side, beneath the gaze of towering stone angels that beckon the faithful into the subterranean stronghold. His helm is gone, torn away almost an hour before, and his enhanced respiration labours in the thick air. But he stands, and he fights, and his sword never falls still.

The enemy flood around him, sacrificing their lives for the chance to pull at his limbs, seeking to drag him down. He kills them with blade, with boot, with fist. They are only human, *he tells himself.* Only human. *Their bones break. Their blood stains his tabard a sick pink. He kills most of them fast enough that they can scarcely cry out. As for the others, without their insect-faced oxygen masks, they strangle and die without the need for a death earned by the blade. Smashing their respirator tanks is enough to*

leave them dead.

The great gates cannot close. Even if the black knights had not destroyed the mechanics with melta detonations upon arrival, the number of corpses spread across the avenue now defies any chance of the portals sealing shut. With animal desperation, the blasphemous faithful try to save their temple-city from defilement. Teams of sweating soldiers work to haul the immense stone gates shut as their brethren die on the black knights' blades.

The first Imperial soldier to reach the knights is Vinculus himself, a lord of the Inquisition and temporary commander of the Adepta Sororitas forces. He, like the army behind him, has had to climb the barricade of bodies.

High Marshal Ludoldus of the Black Templars is waiting for him, with the remaining nine knights of his Sword Brethren. Grimaldus is one of them. Exhausted, his breath saws in and out.

There is no shame in kneeling. They have been fighting for almost three hours, alone and without even the whisper of reinforcement. The dead lie broken in their hundreds. Amongst them, the Sword Brethren kneel on weary limbs, catching precious respite. Some are too weary to even lift their heads. As Space Marines, they will recover within minutes where mere men would need days of rest. Yet, as mortal warriors, their flesh has been pushed through torment, and even bionic limbs have malfunctioned with overworked joints.

One still stands. He will not kneel. He will not *kneel.*

'You fought well,' his liege lord tells him. 'I am beginning to believe you were born lucky, Merek.'

Grimaldus pulls a bayonet knife from the armpit joint of his scratched armour, and casts the blade aside without wiping his blood from it. He makes the crusader's cross to his commander, letting the wound seal itself.

Ludoldus has fought unhelmed, letting his three lungs filter the filth in the breath-starved air. Grimaldus sees his commander's eyes flick to the left, and turns to follow the High Marshal's gaze.

Mordred, Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade, stands among the dead. He watches the newest of Ludoldus's Sword Brethren, saying nothing, staring with red eye-lenses and a grinning silver skull for a face.

Within the Temple City.

The streets are vast tunnels worming through the rock. Homes and shrines

are hollowed-out caverns, forced into stability by great stone pillars, defended by shrieking, chanting, cowering families.

The war has ended, and the massacre has begun. Gouts of chemical fire spray forth in hissing rushes from the charred muzzles of sacred flamers, while the crashing bang of bolters plays in relentless percussion. Flailing, burning bodies line the ground. Despite the ingenuity of the subterranean city's ventilation engines, filtration systems are failing under the strain of cleansing the oxygen supply. Fire eats the air before the Space Marines and Sisters of Battle can breathe it. After needing rebreathers for the march up the mountainside, Imperial forces find themselves needing to don them again to prevent suffocation underground.

The mines run deep in the volcano, but the habitable sectors of the great city sit much closer to the surface. It takes less than an hour to reach the heart of the heresy, and Grimaldus – a warrior incapable of admiring allies and enemies alike – is awed by the cathedral hewn from the burning rock. Here, great landing platforms of magma-scarred metal sit beneath the sealed sky-tunnels, where once pilgrim shuttles and mining haulers came to refuel before journeying deeper into the volcano's innards.

A geological monument to a whole world's power takes up kilometre after kilometre of space in the great cavern. The cathedral itself is born right from the rock, its pillars and battlements moulded from the cave walls, suspended above a molten river. The running lake of magma puts him in mind, just for a moment, of the underworld rivers flowing through so many human myths.

The last survivors still flee before the advancing Imperials, spilling in a tide across the earthen bridges leading into the temple. They die with their wounds in their backs.

High Marshal Ludoldus leads them to the rock avenue over the molten chasm. He levels his blade at the angel-adorned walls of the heretic cathedral, and sends the black knights forward in a shouting tide.

'Destroy the power generators,' Inquisitor Vinculus's orders crackle over the vox. 'I want the sky shafts open before the sun rises over this worthless world.'

His voice is joined by the High Marshal's. 'And kill every living soul within that temple.'

Swords cut deep and blood runs cold. After the executions, they find the arch-heretic alone, unarmed, and weeping. He wears no flowing robes of priestly office, and he sits upon no ornate throne of gold and volcanic glass. What they find is a man in miners' overalls kneeling in meditative prayer, his cheeks silvered by the slow flow of tears. He wears a breathing mask as he prays on the battlements of his cathedral, but doesn't even open his eyes as his killers approach from behind.

Grimaldus is among them, at the shoulder of his liege lord. He is the first to tense, to move forward in an eager rush. Ludoldus restrains him with a gesture.

'No,' the High Marshal says to the black knight. 'Not you.' Grimaldus's chainsword sputters to stillness, idling in the burning air.

It is Vinculus – too human and so very frail – who steps forward. His frame is weak next to the knights at his side, but his voice is cold iron.

'In the name of the God-Emperor of Mankind,' he says to the kneeling heretic, 'I do judge thee diabolus extremis, unfit for existence within His Holy Majesty's galaxy.'

'You do not understand,' the kneeling, weeping man replies. He makes no move to defend himself as Vinculus closes from behind, bearing doom in the form of a short, energised blade. 'I am a vessel. Just a vessel.'

The tip of the sacred sword rests against his spine. Vinculus braces for the push that will finish the traitor's life, and end the war.

The heretic's watering eyes turn to the knights. 'Forgive me.'

'Wait.' Grimaldus steps forward, a hand raised in warning. 'Wait!' Reclusiarch Mordred is at his side, saying the same words, giving the same order.

The sword lances home, biting deep into the man's body. The self-proclaimed vessel falls to the stone, dying, breaking apart to free the thing within. Cancer spills from the wound, a ghost of oily smoke, leaping in a spreading cloud and clinging to the inquisitor's wide eyes and open mouth. He damns himself to death the moment he breathes it in.

Mordred is the first to move, his crozius maul raised high. Sword Brother Grimaldus is a heartbeat behind him, chainsword revving. Vinculus falls back, screaming, tearing at his eyes, dragging them from his face with curled fingers. They come free, strings of viscera behind, and he holds them out, seemingly offering them to the two charging knights.

Vinculus falls, howling, vomiting wet blackness that has no place in a human body. Mordred and Grimaldus take him to pieces with their weapons, as if they can carve the corruption from its new host.

The inquisitor laughs through the excreted filth. Pressure builds in the air around them, as though heralding a peal of thunder. Just as it strikes, the inquisitor's body bursts open.

Sourceless, directionless darkness falls, with the finality of a hammer blow.

The first thing he feels is the familiar pain of a broken body. Life is war, and war is pain: this is a truth he has survived a thousand times. There is no great secret to pain; he sees it no differently to the biorhythmic signs playing out on his retinal display. Pain is nothing more than a sign he is still alive.

Grimaldus drags himself to his feet, boots thudding on the scorched rock bridge above the chasm of liquid fire. His armour is halfway to annihilation, burned and scraped and chipped, bleeding sparks from severed power cables. The cathedral is a detonated ruin, and its besiegers have been cast across the cavern. Huge chunks of masonry still rain down on the cavern, plunging into the fire chasm.

Bodies lie everywhere. Dead knights, dead Sisters, dead heretics in their hundreds. Among the corpses, survivors begin to stir. But not enough. Some are already standing, weapons in their hands. But not enough.

Three minutes. According to his retinal display, he has been unconscious for three whole minutes. He will do penance for his weakness, if he survives this night. No matter that almost every soul in the cavern has suffered the same way – he sees it as a weakness that deserves punishment. Dorn's martyring blood burns hot in his veins.

The daemon walks through the dead, hunting the living, smashing aside the few swords that rise to bar its way. It is a seething mass of deep-sea nightmare fears given form, that underwater sensation of looking into the endless black of the open ocean, never knowing what lies beyond the mist of human vision. No longer the size of the man inside which it hosted, the poisonous creature has swollen to a riper, truer scale, crushing bodies beneath its cartilaginous claws. It dances at the edge of Grimaldus's focus, a thing of two worlds and at home in neither. The knight's eyes water through the chiming pulses of target locks, his mind aching from the sin of

witnessing the thing's existence.

Ludoldus, High Marshal of the Black Templars, faces the beast on the black stone bridge. At his feet are the armoured forms of Jasmine, Canoness of the Bloody Rose, and Ulricus, Emperor's Champion of the Vinculus Crusade. Two great heroes, champions of humanity in their own right, slain while Grimaldus surrendered to unconsciousness. He will ensure the penance for somnolence lasts a long, long time.

On a whim, he looks up, seeking any damage to the cavern's expansive ceiling. He has no wish to be buried here, dead or alive. A moment later, he's reactivating his vox link.

'This is Sword Brother Grimaldus to the Eternal Crusader. Eternal Crusader, *respond.'*

'Sword Brother.'

'The power generators are down and the sky thoroughfares are open.'

'Understood, Sword Brother. Gunships en route.'

The black knight reaches for a sword that isn't there. In the absence of his own blade, he takes a weapon from the dead. The chain that had bound it to its former owner's armour hangs loose and broken.

Ludoldus is forced onto the defensive, parrying rather than cutting, each lift of his relic blade warding away another sweep of fanged tentacles and fleshy claws. Soon enough, he's stepping backwards, giving ground with silent curses.

He aches as never before. No single creature can be so strong. No beast of the warp has ever tested his warriors in this way. Ulricus, a warrior without compare, traded a mere seven blows with the creature before it gutted him with its talons. Jasmine lasted no longer – the two pieces of her body lie shrouded by the fall of her scarlet banner.

They cannot kill this thing. They cannot overwhelm it with numbers. Skill is meaningless against its speed. The beast's blows weigh on him, numbing his muscles. Each of its breaths comes with a mucosal spray of rancid air, clouding the knight-lord's sight.

The Sisters and knights fighting with him are smashed away, broken and cracked-open things tossed into the chasm of fire. Another knight reaches his side; slain in a heartbeat. And another, bashed aside by a flailing claw, knocked from the stone bridge to plummet into the magma river. Next, a

Sister dies, melting and shrieking in the backwash of her own flame weapon as the beast roars the fire back against her. In a queasy blur, it looms back over Ludoldus.

He risks reaching for the grenade at his belt, but the creature's assault batters at his blade. He needs both hands to ward the thing's attacks away. He's down on one knee now, kneeling among the beast's kills, parrying above him. He needs a second – just a single second – to reach for…

The daemon pushes down against his blade. Ludoldus pours his strength into the parry, feeling his muscles crackle with tightening sinew. As the talon draws back, the High Marshal is already bringing his blade up again to block the claw's next descent.

It never comes. The falling claw is blocked by a war maul. The weapon's energy field crackles and strains, failing under the beast's strength.

'Mordred.' Ludoldus is laughing.

It isn't Mordred. Another warrior carries Mordred's crozius arcanum.

Sword Brother Grimaldus's red cloak is aflame. His armour is an ornate ruin of dented plate and blackened chains.

'Sire,' he breathes over the vox. An acknowledgement of fate.

The High Marshal frees one hand from his sword long enough to clutch at the holy incendiary buckled to his belt. The grenade comes free. Ludoldus thumbs the activation rune, hard enough to crack the orb's armoured shell. He raises it, a holy icon, shouting defiance as the daemon bellows downward.

Ludoldus hurls it, not at the beast, but at the creature's feet.

An Antioch orb is among the rarest weapons sacred to the Chapter. First created several thousand years before by Techmarine Antioch of the Black Templars, they are – by any measure – many magnitudes more lethal than the standard grenades available to other Chapters among the Adeptus Astartes. Consecrated oils and sacred acids are blended with compacted explosives, making each incendiary a personal masterpiece, inscribed with its own damnations, blessings and High Gothic mandalas. A grenade will kill the righteous and unrighteous alike, but an Antioch orb will ensure the blasphemous burn in agony as they meet their end.

The sacred sphere detonates as it crashes against the bridge. Ludoldus and Grimaldus are already retreating, refusing to show their backs to the foe, accepting flash blindness as the price of witnessing their enemy's end.

The explosion comes in a sunflare of white light, bathing the daemon in holy fire and blasting rock in every direction. The bridge starts to fall, crumbling, dragging many of the cavern's support pillars down with it.

The beast is falling, aflame. Its shrieks don't end even when it plunges into the magma. Grimaldus falls back from the shattered bridge, staring in disgusted disbelief as the creature thrashes in the molten rock, its flesh igniting further, spraying liquid rock from its flailing limbs. New arms form as others melt away. New mouths tear open in its grey-squid flesh, sealing closed after they've jettisoned their screams. Some swallow the lava, while others vomit it back out.

Ludoldus stumbles as gravity eats the ground from under him; Grimaldus's gauntlet slams into the collar of his golden armour, dragging him back from the precipice.

'Gunships inbound,' the Sword Brother grunts as he pulls his lord to safety.

'It isn't dead,' Ludoldus warns him.

Grimaldus can see that himself. 'Not yet.'

They open fire. The crashing of bolters echoes from the walls as they fire down into the molten muck – remnants of the Sisters and the black knight squads, gathered in their bleeding dozens and standing among the hundreds of dead.

The dying beast has abandoned all pretensions of humanity. With thrashing, coiling limbs too numerous to count, the subaqueous, cephalopodic thing is revealed as an avatar of pain, manifest as spraying magma and steaming screams. It defies size, for it defies mortal sight. It is the size of a man's trapped soul; it is the size of a monster from myth, swelling and pulsating, abused by the thousands of explosive shells raining against its form.

Bolts burst inside its body, sending lava spraying in place of blood and flesh. Still it climbs. Metre by agonising metre, the thing of rock and molten sludge hauls itself up the cavern walls, seeking the lives of the insects that still volley their pinprick torment. They can feel its hate like a wind against their faces. It despises them for the sin of living. That hatred is enough to fuel its manifestation past the point of destruction.

It doesn't reach for them. It reaches for the cavern's support pillars.

Wrapping round them. Gripping them. Cracking them.

Breaking them. One after the other, the monstrous soul claws its way from pillar to pillar, bringing down the cavern in its rage.

Nothing in the material realm can ignore its wounds forever. As the rocks begin to fall, the creature's howls turn to whines. The sacred orb, and the bursting wounds of so many bolt shells, rip free the last of its strength. It flails at another pillar, its winding limbs failing to latch on, leaving it thrashing and tumbling to the ground among the rain of rock. Boulders shatter on the cavern floor and the ruined bridge, filling the air with dust.

The knights and Sisters ring the fallen horror, executing it with blade and flame. Feeble struggles claim no more human lives. The thing collapses in on itself, dissolving, tainting the air with clouds of stinking vapour from its scabrous wounds.

There is no silence after any victory. A battlefield will still clamour with the cries of the dying and the growling flames of burning tanks. Here, beneath the earth, any silence is slain by the thunder of falling rock and the guttural rumble of the shaking ground.

The first gunships stream in through the sky vents. On the ground, knights and war-maidens look to the vaulted cavern ceiling, praying for each Thunderhawk that weaves between the plummeting debris. Stalactites drop in a torrent of earthward spears. The burning, rolling hulks of destroyed gunships smash across the ground alongside the monsoon of lethal stone.

A blow crashes into Grimaldus, the sudden crash staggering him. It was no rockfall: Reclusiarch Mordred looms above him, coldness staring out from the red eye-lenses of his silver skull facade.

'It is a sin most foul,' the warrior-priest growls, 'to steal a Chaplain's weapon.'

Grimaldus stares up at the Reclusiarch from the ground. Instinct almost has him launch back to his feet and throw himself at his attacker, but temperance prevails at the heart of the rock storm.

'I thought you were dead.'

Mordred doesn't reply. He holds out his hand, waiting with insane, silent patience as the world falls down around them.

'That is all?' asked Ekene. The Lions were all watching me.

'That was how the battle ended.'

‘So you earned the skull-smile through valour.’

I did not know the answer, myself. Mordred had always ignored the question when I had asked it, considering it meaningless. *The result matters,* he always replied, *not the decisions made to reach it.*

‘I was one of the last still standing at the gate. I was the first to sense the change within Vinculus, and act with Mordred. I guarded my liege lord’s life with the Chaplain’s weapon, and pulled Ludoldus back from the chasm’s edge.’

‘Those acts look fine on a roll of honour,’ Ekene said. The Pride Leader was no fool. He could tell I was holding something back. ‘But I sense there is more.’

‘There is,’ I admitted. ‘Nothing of drama and heroism. Just a moment of curiosity I have never been able to set aside.’

Only two gunships remain.

The first rises on protesting engines, whining for altitude as the boulders fall. One moment it lifts from the crumbling ground, landing gear folding closed in a clanking chorus of technology – the next it detonates in a heartsick flash of promethium fuel. Its wreckage, crushed beneath a toppled pillar, gives an animal-corpse twitch as its engines die.

The last gunship breathes lung-burning jet wash as it begins its own rise. The last knights run and leap for the gangramp, hauled up by their waiting brothers.

‘The void,’ orders Ludoldus, breathing heavily with his back to the cargo bay wall. ‘Get us into the void, Artarion.’ The pilot voxes acknowledgement as the Thunderhawk climbs higher.

‘Grimaldus.’ The High Marshal rests back next to Mordred, his weathered features in stark contrast to the Chaplain’s cadaverous faceplate.

‘Sire?’ Grimaldus replies.

‘You are the last of my knights still wearing a red cloak.’

For a moment, the knight hesitates, almost arguing that it cannot be true. But he stood with the High Marshal watching the survivors evacuate, unwilling to leave the field of battle before his men and their allies. He saw no other Sword Brothers among the living.

‘That may be true, sire.’

‘It is true.’ Ludoldus turns to Mordred. ‘I told you fate favoured him, did I

not?’

Mordred says nothing, just staring with that skullish grin.

The Lions nodded among themselves, sharing smiles.

‘Not just valour, then,’ Ekene ventured. ‘Luck, as well. You were marked out from your brothers by fortune as well as ferocity.’

‘It is a possibility,’ I confessed. ‘Mordred was a mercurial soul. I have never known why he chose me.’

‘Or why he was told to choose you.’

‘Or… what?’ In all my life, I was so rarely speechless. That night, I felt my words and breath both catch in my throat.

Why he was told to choose you. As I was told to choose Cyneric.

‘I meant no offence,’ Ekene replied.

‘None offered, and none taken.’ I almost smiled, though they would never have seen it even if I had. My faceplate – Mordred’s faceplate before it was mine – revealed nothing of emotion. ‘My tale is told, cousins.’

‘Not enough blood,’ one of them said, earning agreement from his brothers.

‘And yet another reason never to trust the weak little souls claiming inquisitor rank,’ said Ekene. That earned another few chuckles. ‘I would, however, have engaged the beast myself. Blade to claw.’

‘Of course,’ the other Lions join in, with good-natured growls.

I was starting to realise the informality in their ranks was not one of ill-discipline, but unreserved brotherhood. Curious, how two Chapters from the same gene-stock can be so different. Birth world meant everything to these warriors. To the Templars, almost nothing.

‘So, cousins,’ I said. ‘I have paid your toll. Tell me what I wish to know. Speak of Khattar.’

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V

DEATH SENTENCE

‘Khattar.’ Ekene made a curse of the name.

‘Khattar,’ several of the others echoed. They were unhelmed, their dark faces bronzed by the flames. As rank and file troopers, they seemed reluctant to look at me for long. I caught them making occasional glances in my direction, at my tabard, heraldry, or the polished silver of my skull faceplate.

‘That was no war,’ one of them said.

‘Nothing but a slaughter,’ chimed another, from the other side of the fire. Their way of retelling tales seemed be almost ritualistic. Every voice was equal. Everyone’s story mattered.

Ekene was leading the storytelling gathering. ‘I was never present at meetings of Chapter command,’ he said. ‘But I was there. I was on Khattar.’

‘I was there,’ the others chorused, in their low voices.

Around us, Lions patrolled between the hulls of the few remaining tanks left to the Chapter. The vehicles were worn down by gunfire, with smoke taint darkening their cerulean paintwork. Ekene and his brothers could have been spirits themselves, drifting among the memories of their dead Chapter.

‘Khattar was a world of priests and preachers,’ he began. ‘Of followers and the faithful.’

‘An Ecclesiarchy world,’ I said. They did not regard it as interruption. Most of them nodded, and Ekene smiled.

‘As you say, Reclusiarch. A world in thrall to the ivory tower priests of the Imperial Creed.’

‘But it soured,’ one of the others added. From the scrollwork on his

shoulderguard, the warrior's name was Jehanu. He looked young, scarcely out of his Scout trials. Space Marines show their age in their scars.

'Their faith rotted on the vine,' Jehanu said. 'And they called for us.'

'The priesthood fell into deviancy,' Ekene took over, 'as so many do, in so many of our tales in this Final Age of Man. They prayed to the Gods behind the Veil, and their dark untruths carried the faithful masses away from the Emperor's light, spreading to the highest echelons and furthest reaches.'

Jehanu interjected again. 'You ask what could those priests have chanted to poison the souls of a whole world?'

Were the Lions mission briefings relayed in the same warrior-by-warrior retelling of facts? A curious custom.

'Blasphemy,' said another Lion with an amused snort. 'Blasphemy and lies, compelling enough to sound like truth to a society weary of their prayers going unanswered.'

The Lions nodded. I wondered how true that was, across the galaxy. The Emperor was immortal and mighty beyond reckoning. But he was no god. Mankind – in its blessed ignorance – worshipped him as one.

Yet false gods cannot answer prayers. How tempting it must seem to those sects and societies far from Terra to seek other answers when pleading with the Emperor brings only silence.

'Where were the world's defenders, I hear you ask?' Ekene showed his teeth in a feral shadow of a smile. 'The planetary defence forces did not rise up to purge the revolt. They joined it. And more were still to come: Imperial Guard regiments in nearby systems did the same – such was the ferocity of Khattar's blasphemy.'

'Apollyon,' Jehanu spoke up again. 'Apollyon was the inquisitor who pleaded for our support, for his efforts to crush the faithless lies had met with failure after failure.'

Ekene stared into the fire as he agreed. I could see the sparks of memories in his eyes. 'He had a Naval blockade, but nothing in the way of surface troops. So in the wake of his failure, we made planetfall in full force. Hundreds of us, Reclusiarch. We rained holy fire, sacred iron and true faith on a world that had forgotten the taste of all three.'

'Slaughter followed,' said Jehanu.

'What chance did they have?' another Lion, Ashaki, put forth. 'They were mere men, following the lies of false prophets. We destroyed them.'

‘All of them,’ Jehanu grinned. ‘Every man and woman with a weapon in their hands.’

Ekene took over once more. ‘We quenched the rebellion in a matter of weeks. No armies existed once we were finished with Khattar, not even a town militia. Nowhere on that world did a single priest still draw breath. With the armed resistance annihilated, we returned to our ships. Whatever heresy lingered among the defenceless population was under the eyes of others now – no longer a matter for bolters and blades.’

Jehanu barked a nasty laugh. ‘Such faith in our allies, we had that day.’

‘As with any cleansing,’ Ekene continued, ‘we expected preachers of the Creed to take over, shepherding the lost populace back to enlightenment.’

Ekene had been cleaning his bolter. Now he lay it aside, looking back into the fire. ‘It took several days to recover our materiel, honour our dead, and prepare to leave. Apollyon’s underlings worked on the world below, assessing the population of eight billion for signs of further deviancy. We were scarcely out of orbit when Apollyon’s warship opened fire on the world below. The rest of the Imperial Navy blockade fired with him, targeting cities and population centres.’

‘We watched them,’ said Ashaki, ‘spitting fire onto the world we had just bled to cleanse of corruption. Our honour burned with those cities. Every shot we had fired, betrayed as a waste.’

I remained silent, waiting for the rest.

‘Our lords demanded the blockade cease fire and answer for its actions,’ Ashaki spat into the fire. ‘Apollyon claimed he had determined the entire population tainted beyond salvation. He even thanked us for our “worthy efforts, though they were in vain”.’

‘An hour later,’ said Jehanu, ‘Khattar’s cities were dust.’

I took a slow breath, shaping the words to suit my reply. ‘It is possible that he was astute in his observations. Heresy had clearly taken root through Khattar’s society. Perhaps it had wormed as deep as Apollyon claimed.’

The Lions bristled. I could tell they ached to show their anger, but the skull helm I wore stayed their hands. That, and the fact I could kill any one of them without breathing hard.

Ashaki was the one to speak. ‘Are you saying he was capable of determining the taint running through several billion souls in a handful of days?’

‘No. I am saying nothing more than the fact it has taken me a single heartbeat to see corruption in the minds of men before, and a man in Apollyon’s position can afford no chances.’

‘You stand with him?’ Ekene was growling now.

Words came to me in that moment, Mordred’s words. I could have merely opened my mouth and spoken them for him, as surely as if he were still alive, still telling me what to think and who to kill.

The innocent will always die when the guilty are punished. Is that wrong? By what scale of virtue do we judge morality? This is life. This is duty. This is necessity. We mourn the innocents lying in mass graves with the guilty, and we move on. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Imperium.

I said none of this, though it was as true as anything else. Ekene took my silence as disregard.

‘You believe he was justified?’ the Lion almost snarled the words. ‘That he slaughtered billions of men, women and children on the chance they were all tainted, and it is our place to *ignore it?*’

Before Helsreach, yes, I would have said exactly that. But no longer. *Balance,* I thought. *Balance between wrath and wisdom.* I looked at him, still saying nothing. He seemed to recall to whom he was speaking, and nodded a subtle apology.

‘Calm your spite, Ekene, for it is meaningless here. Apollyon acted within the rights granted by his rank; he did as many of his Inquisitorial kindred would do. He also did as many Chapter Masters would have done. That does not make it wise, or right, or virtuous. It merely makes it real.’

‘It makes it an effort to hide some filthy secret,’ Jehanu insisted, and his brothers nodded. ‘The tale reeks of a man seeking to hide some grievous error, does it not?’

‘Perhaps. But if he had so much to hide, why summon a Space Marine Chapter? Perhaps Apollyon was merely a hasty fool to whom life meant little, and that mournful truth is one we have to live with. He is hardly the first man of exalted rank to decay in a position of power.’

‘You are as cold as any Deathspeaker,’ Ekene said, but the anger was bleeding from his words.

Cold-blooded off the battlefield, hot-blooded upon it. This is your place. More of Mordred’s words.

‘I will not pass judgement on a moment I never saw, between men I do not

know. That is not my place. I judge my brothers – their actions and their souls – not the pathetic intricacies of Imperial Law. Tell me what came next. Did you fire on his fleet?'

Ekene shook his head. 'No, never. Chapter Command sent word throughout the subsector, warning all Imperial outposts and regional governors what had occurred and decrying the actions of the Inquisition. Word was also sent directly to Terra – a delegation of Deathspeakers and Warleaders chosen for the task, to show the gravity of the situation.'

'They never reached Terra.' I did not need to guess the fate of those well-intentioned souls. They would never set foot on the Throneworld. 'They were never seen again.'

'Oh, we saw them again,' Jehanu said, quietly.

'We found their vessel two years later,' Ekene admitted. 'Dead in the void, deep in greenskin space. All damage was indicative of a ruinous warp flight. No signs of weapons fire on the hull.'

I had seen the interior of several vessels gutted by warp storms. All life torn into genetic scrap; all metal mutated and poisoned beyond salvage.

'And then?'

'We kept demanding an investigation into the Khattar Massacre. We sent word to any Imperial officials who would listen, from planetary regents to the priest-kings of Ecclesiarchy worlds. If any such investigation took place, it remained a mystery to us. Armageddon called, and we answered. Which brings us… here.'

Jehanu gestured at the hollow armoury as Ekene finished. 'They want to silence us.'

'No,' I replied. 'Far from it.'

The Lions looked at me, seemingly unsure if I were making some dark jest. But I was not; the Inquisition were not acting to silence the Lions, and I was certain Julkhara had known that when he reached out to me.

'Then what?'

'They are using you,' I told the survivors around the scrap-fire. 'They are using you to make an example. The Lions are the most recent casualty in the institution's campaign to rein in the autonomy of the Adeptus Astartes. The Inquisition tolerates no attacks on its sovereign rights – yet you challenged them. And now all will bear witness to the price of your rebellion. The sabotages, the conflicting orders, the ambushes. A Chapter

will not just suffer for defying the Inquisition and slandering its virtue. A Chapter will die in shame for it. Millions will hear of how you were killed on Armageddon. A mere handful will know the truth behind your deaths, and each of those will be Adeptus Astartes officers who will tread with much more caution when they deal with the Inquisition in the future. The lesson will be learned, just as Apollyon's cronies wish.'

The Lions digested this in silence. Eventually, Ekene spoke, looking into my eye-lenses.

'We are going back to Mannheim,' he said.

I had been waiting for those words.

'I know.'

'Many of the Gargants are gone, but it is still a well-defended stronghold. It remains a cancer of enemy presence in Volcanus's territory, and it must fall.'

That seemed idealistic, at best. 'It will not fall, Ekene. Not to a handful of Lions, no matter how noble and proud.'

He spread his hands in calm acceptance. 'Then we will die trying.'

Akashi leaned forward, adding his voice to his sergeant's. 'That is where we have chosen to die. It has to be there. Our bones shall lie alongside our brothers'.'

Jehanu nodded. 'Remember us, Reclusiarch.' His voice was low, and his tone plaintive. 'Take the truth with you when you leave this world. Spread it among the Chapters that share Dorn's bloodline.'

They were asking a great deal of me. If I did as they asked, it could all too easily draw the Inquisition's ire upon the Black Templars. Even so, they should have known they had no need to ask. Of course I would do it. It was the valorous truth. I could no more hide that than I could forsake the Eternal Crusade and retire to a life of ignorant peace.

'The truth will sail with me,' I vowed. 'And you are fools for believing it might not.' They shared smiles again; that curious tribal brotherhood. 'You mean to fight alone?' I asked.

'We must,' replied Ekene. 'Volcanus cannot spare its Guard regiments. Even with Mannheim emptied of Gargants in the weeks since the massacre – a fact we still cannot be certain is true – it is still a brutal target, rich with enemy presence. Five of our battle companies failed to take it. A few thousand Guardsmen will be nothing more than spitting into the wind.'

Ashaki snorted in derision. ‘And we can trust none of them, anyway. The Inquisition’s talons are everywhere.’

Ekene growled, little different from the beast that gave his Chapter its name. ‘I just want one chance to kill the warlord that devoured our dead. I will die content if I drag him to the grave with me.’

I breathed the stale, recycled air of my suit’s internal oxygen supply. It tasted of sweat.

‘Mankind’s galaxy will mourn the loss of the Celestial Lions.’

‘Let them mourn.’ Ekene’s lip curled in disgust. ‘If this is our reward for loyal service, they are welcome to their grief.’

Something in my demeanour must have warned him, for he continued more cautiously. ‘This is how it has to end, Deathspeaker. Let it finish in fire, not in centuries of painstaking laboratory work to preserve our bloodline. We will die as warriors.’

Yes, they would. A hundred warriors, dying in glory… and denying the possibility of thousands of warriors who might be needed in a darker future.

As the stories and oaths came to a close, the unwelcome truth was that I heard nothing but empty promise in their words. Was there worth in glory, even if defeat was the only legacy? I had watched the Shadow Wolves die, and been inspired by their sacrifice. Now the Lions threatened to make the same journey, down the same path. But my blood ran cold, beating from a calmer heart.

A Chaplain is the future of his Chapter. He must guard its rituals and traditions and histories, as well as his battle-brothers’ souls. It was not senseless violence that shaped our worth, but focused ferocity. Ferocity in war, when we killed our foes. Ferocity in peace, when we shepherded our kindred’s souls. Our place was to make the decisions others could not be trusted to make. Ferocity was our weapon against ignorance or blind faith, the same as it was our weapon against humanity’s enemies.

It was Dorn’s way to fight no matter the odds. Death against overwhelming odds was no shame to us, or to any warrior of Imperial Fists gene-seed. Yet, those were lessons first taught ten thousand years ago – *those words again* – when the Imperium was so, so much stronger. The last centuries of this Dark Millennium had all but bled man’s empire dry.

So I admired Ekene for his hunger to taste a glorious death, even if it was in a last charge few would remember.

But viciousness and glory were no longer enough. Killing enemies in battle was no longer enough. I wanted to fight the Eternal Crusade. I wanted to win the war.

Cyneric was right. The Lions' deaths now would be a disservice to the Imperium, no matter the greatness of their glorious last stand; no matter the heroism of individual warriors as they spent their life's blood.

Ekene was not finished. He cleared his throat, sensing the dissipation of my thoughts.

'One more thing, Reclusiarch. Would you perform the Heart's Thunder Dirge for us?'

The Heart's Thunder Dirge. I did not know the words, but I could guess their meaning. Among my Chapter, we called it the Rite of the Forlorn Knight, in honour of a warrior's last battle. A prayer for the dying. I felt my skin crawl, and my teeth close together.

'I said I would speak of your death. That I understand it. Now you wish me to bless your damnation? To give your extinction my personal blessing?'

The Lions were all looking at me, but now none sought to meet my eyes. 'We have no Deathspeakers,' said Ekene. He recoiled, slowly but surely, the way the Salamanders had recoiled from me months before in the ruins of Helsreach.

I was merciless, for I wanted to be absolutely clear. 'You wish me to give my blessing to warriors of another Chapter, sharing the Templars sacred rituals, and vowing before the Emperor and Dorn that your death is a noble testament to the Imperial Fists bloodline. You wish me to endorse your deaths. That is what you ask?'

'Yes, Reclusiarch.' Several nodded at Ekene's affirmation. 'It is a curse to die unblessed.'

'When do you intend to make this last stand?'

'What benefit is there in delaying the inevitable?' he replied. 'We will gather our resources tomorrow at our forward base, and make one last scouting run for supplies and survivors. The Lions charge to war at dawn the day after.'

The *Eternal Crusader* would break orbit the same day, in pursuit of Armageddon's arch-warlord. I would have to time this very well.

'Will you bless our last hours, Reclusiarch, and consecrate our final

deeds?’

I looked across the foundry’s junkyard, where Cyneric patrolled with another Lion, bolters in their hands. I rose to my feet amidst their desperate, respectful silence. Ekene started to object, to ask me to stay, but my mind was ironclad. The decision had been made.

‘No.’

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VI

CHOICES

We could not return to Helsreach. The Season of Fire played its tempestuous games around my city, harsh enough to kill sky traffic but not quite violent enough to slay vox signals. The storm was predicted to last between three and nine hours. The former would be an acceptable flaw in the plan; the latter would leave precious little time to do anything at all. If the storm died down at all.

Aboard the *Eternal Crusader,* I walked the cold halls of the Temple of Dorn. Relics of war and glory rested behind shimmering auras, atop marble plinths housing rattling, grinding stasis field generators. War banners hung proud from the vaulted gothic ceiling. There was always something skeletal about the temple, and it derived from more than the arched architecture. I always believed it reminiscent of some sepulchral afterlife, where warriors walk after their deaths in battle. Legacies go there to die.

Cyneric walked with me, astute enough to know that when I was silent, I was silent for a reason. He did not push me to talk. I would not say that I liked him then, but I was finding it easier to tolerate him.

In truth, I had not gone there to be alone with the Chapter's revered treasures. I had gone there to put plans in motion. From the great bay window, I looked down on the embattled, scarred globe of Armageddon. Its cities were smoking scabs. Its canyons were dirty scars. Its oil-rich oceans were graveyards for dead greenskin ships.

A lesser man might see a world at war, and feel sorrow for the loss of life. All I could feel was hate. I hated the greenskins for defiling our territory. I hated the planet itself for defying our attempts to save it.

A lesser man. There is the lack of humility that so coloured Mordred's thoughts. *An unchanged man,* then. A true human, one not altered by the Emperor's genetic designs, would feel sorrow.

The fleet was at anchor, relishing a respite from the near-constant void warfare that still broke out in the skies. No new alien reinforcements had translated in-system for almost a week – the longest ceasefire yet. Shuttles, gunships and cargo haulers drifted between our vessels – the final refuelling and rearming taking place before we left in pursuit of the alien warchief.

It felt as though I waited an age for my handheld hololithic transmitter to give a signal pulse. Cyneric kept his distance, paying reverence to the weapons and suits of armour on display, each one waiting to be claimed by a worthy warrior from our generation, or the generations that would follow.

'Vox link established,' came the bridge servitor's voice. Using the *Eternal Crusader*'s communications array had been the only way to amplify my transmitter's signal. A hololithic avatar started to form, ghostly blue, above my palm.

'Colonel Ryken,' I greeted the flickering image.

'That is not the case,' the hololithic ghost replied, in a voice husky with flawed vox. Details of the soldier started to drift into resolution. It was not Colonel Ryken – as if the man's reply had not revealed that already. 'This link is not so good, eh? I have no visual feed. Also, forgiveness please, but Colonel Ryken is away doing other soldierly things. He is not here. He is gone.'

I took a breath, inwardly counselling myself to be patient.

'I need to speak with him at once.'

'As do I, I assure you, for the colonel owes me money. A serious matter, yes? If he dies before paying me back, my temper will be terrible to behold. I am Captain Andrej Valatok of the Legion. How may I be of serving use to you?'

'Have your adepts relay this signal to–'

'What is wrong with this vox link? Mountain bears growl less than you, I am thinking. You sound like a Space Marine.'

'I *am* a Space Marine.'

'Aha! I am, if not good friends, then at least well acquainted with Reclusiarch Grimaldus of the Black Templars. The Hero of Helsreach, you know? I saved his life one time. He even thanked me.'

‘Andrej,’ I replied, making every letter a slow threat. ‘This *is* Reclusiarch Grimaldus.’

‘Hail, Reclusiarch! You sound angry.’

‘*Listen to me.* I need to speak with Colonel Ryken, Adjutant Tyro or General Kurov.’

‘They are all gone from Forward Command, yes? But I am here. I am overseeing the storm trooper divisions in the northern and western engagement zones.’

Cyneric approached, gesturing to the hololithic image in its trenchcoat and steel helmet.

‘He is not what I expected in a storm trooper.’

I let that pass unanswered, but Andrej did not. ‘Technically, no, we are grenadiers. Yes. But it is slang. Also, it is for reference. The paperwork is a bitch. You know how it is, eh? The only easy day was yesterday. But I sense trouble. That is why you summoned me, no?’

‘Hear me well, Andrej. This is important.’

The conversation that followed took longer than was entirely necessary. Andrej, I gathered, was bored. Soldiers do not deal well with tedium, especially soldiers left in a command bunker with nothing to do and no one to shoot.

When Andrej disconnected the link, he had a wealth of orders to obey, and I was braced for several hours of coordinating Helsreach’s defences from high orbit. A great many Guard officers were going to vox skyward for confirmation in the hours to come.

Time passed, in the voices of eighty-one Imperial Guard officers and eleven Naval captains. Images were inloaded and exloaded from my data-slate in a constant stream of encrypted information. My clearance was Rubicon-grade. No one hid their answers from me. No one in Helsreach denied me the lore I sought. No one refused what I asked of them.

‘Is this not exceeding your authority?’ Cyneric asked me at one point.

I was still unused to being questioned, and swallowed the rising bile of my temper.

‘Elaborate,’ I said instead of snarling at him. It took some effort.

Cyneric had removed his helm, and was unhealthily pale beneath the blue-gleam illumination globes mounted in the walls. His expression was not challenging; rather, it was subtly keen.

‘May I?’ he asked, nodding to my handheld auspex. I handed it to him, and he cycled through orbital images of Helsreach suffering another storm. The wounded central spire remained constantly in sight, but the rest of the city swirled in frequent dustcloud obscurity.

‘Speak,’ I bade him.

He kept cycling through the images. ‘I was given to understand you surrendered active command over the hive city’s forces when you left the field after the Battle of the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. General Kurov is listed as active commander in the Helsreach region.’

And he had heard General Kurov two hours ago, one of the many voices heeding my requests.

‘If you object to my actions,’ I said, ‘then say so without fear of retribution.’

‘It is not an objection, sire.’

I felt my blood run cold at his passivity. ‘If you are to be inducted into the secrets of the Reclusiam, I will need you to speak your thoughts.’

‘The Lions will march to their deaths tomorrow while the *Eternal Crusader*’s engines are priming to fire. We will be gone from Armageddon in pursuit of the alien warlord, and whatever transpires at the Mannheim Gap will take place without us. But you mean to save the Lions, do you not? To force them to preserve their Chapter.’

I looked at him, and at the streams of bio-data scrolling next to his austere features.

‘I do. You made it clear you believe their duty is to survive and rebuild their Chapter, as well. If you cling to that belief, how do you find flaw in my plans?’

‘Their survival would be for the best,’ he allowed. ‘It is the path of the greatest good. But you do so by deceiving them. There is the question of honour.’

Honour is life. More ancient words.

‘Nothing so crude,’ I replied. ‘My last words to Pride Leader Ekene were to refuse his request to perform a ritual, and to bid him die well among the bones of his brothers. There is no deception at work, here, Cyneric.’

Cyneric was relentless. ‘But if you deplete Helsreach’s defences to march alongside them at Mannheim…’

‘The city is vastly overdefended now, with entire battalions sitting idle and

awaiting redeployment.’ An irritating truth; would that we had such a problem when the real war was being fought.

‘And are you not playing on the people’s regard for you? The Hero of Helsreach calls them to war. Of course they will follow. But is this their war?’

‘They are soldiers on an embattled world.’ I snarled the words at him, and forced myself to hold a facade of calm. He deserved commending for thinking of so many facets in this matter, not enduring my anger for daring to question me. Apprentices were a chore, and I wondered how often Mordred had struggled with me over the years.

‘It is their world, Cyneric. And it is the only chance the Lions have.’ I rested a hand on his shoulderguard, as Mordred had done with me in moments of quiet instruction. His eyes locked to mine, just as mine had locked to my mentor’s so often, through so many years. ‘The Lions’ unseen enemies may well allow them to die in the glory they deserve. But you were right to argue with Ekene. They must survive. Their deaths serve nothing but to ease the soreness of wounded pride. They must not die on Armageddon. Without help, the Lions are doomed. But if I can take Mannheim…’

Cyneric was immediately on edge. ‘If *you* can take Mannheim?’

I nodded, and handed him a sealed scroll case of black iron. ‘Bear this to the High Marshal. I have always despised farewells.’

He tensed, jaw clenched tight. ‘If you fight with the Lions, I will fight with you.’

‘That is your choice.’ I admired him for that decision, though it did not surprise me at all. Helbrecht had chosen this one well. ‘But you will take this to him now.’

He made the crusader’s cross, and went to do as I had asked.

Alone once more, I turned back to my plans. Everything centred on just how fast my former forces at Helsreach could break out from the storm, and redeploy halfway across the world.

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VII

INK

Helbrecht,

I am remaining on the war-world. Someone must fight alongside the Lions, saving them from futile glory and the worst excesses of their otherwise pure blood. I will rejoin you when I am able. We both know it is likely to be several years, given the whims of the warp, just as we both know my first prophecies may prove right after all, and I will die on this world.

Forgive these words reaching you in ink on parchment, but I have little time and even less inclination to hear you remark how Mordred would let the Lions meet the end they believe they have earned. I will not argue with you about which war matters more. I see no degrees of import in this. The alien king must pay for his transgressions on Armageddon, and it is the Templars' glory to be chosen for the chase. But these are warriors of our blood. To abandon them is to betray Rogal Dorn, and the Imperium he fought to forge.

Both battles matter, so we will fight both battles.

Months ago, I cursed you for leaving me on the surface while you earned all the glory in the skies. How times change.

Hunt well in the stars. I will do the same on this world's cursed soil.

If you cannot condone my decision, then remember this. The Lions have no Chaplains remaining, and they are our cousins. Honour and brotherhood demand this of me.

Honour is more than glory. If Helsreach taught me nothing else, it taught me that. Honour is loyalty. Honour is control over our baser instincts, mastering rage into the most potent weapon it can be, not spending it purely

to earn a saga around the campfire, or an annotation in a roll of victory.

Honour is not bowing to the whims and schemes of fearful weaklings. The Inquisition has already claimed its pound of flesh. I will not let a proud bloodline fall into shadow to sate the endless hunger of starving fools.

The Lions cannot call upon the resources of their hive city, but they will not fight alone. Let Volcanus hide behind its walls. Helsreach is going to war.

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VIII

GATHERING

Planning with Helsreach's command teams took all night. I had wondered if the Lions would have already left their fallen fortress by the time we arrived, marching towards their last stand.

Dawn was less than an hour away as we broke the cloud cover. The Lions had not left us behind. The opposite was true – half of Helsreach's army had already arrived before us.

Unwilling to secure one of our own Thunderhawks, Cyneric had arranged for a Navy shuttle to carry us down to the surface. We descended through a sky cut apart by the contrails of Lightning fighters, with hunched gunships alighting on the landing pads of the Lions' ruined fortress stronghold.

One building – the crenellated central enclave – was plainly serving as the central hive of activity. Almost every other building was abandoned. Battlemented bunkers with anti-aircraft cannons stood in silence. The fortress's walls were pulled down, bent beneath the aliens' rage when they had first swept through the Lions defences in the hours after the massacre at Mannheim. But the final enclave still held firm. Four dust-blasted and paint-stripped Thunderhawks were nesting on the wide rooftop landing platform, marking where the Lions had touched down hours before. Dozens of inelegant, blocky troop landers were joining them there, as well as dusting off outside the enclave's tumbled walls.

Cyneric looked through the shuttle bay window, down at the organised carnage of an Imperial army making ready for war.

'I see a Baneblade,' he said, gesturing to a bulk lander – beetle-ish in its densely armoured shape – releasing a gigantic tank from its payload claws.

‘The *Grey Warrior,’* I replied, feeling my voice thicken in gratitude. ‘General Kurov is taking to the field.’ The tank’s storm-flayed hull was pockmarked and proud, so it had not been idle in the weeks since the war began to ease.

We wished to land at the central enclave, but the pilot struggled to locate an unmarked, untaken patch of ground, let alone a free few metres on a landing pad.

‘Break off the descent,’ I voxed to him. ‘Get back into orbit. Be ready to compensate for the bay doors opening in ten seconds.’

Cut off from our brothers in the void, we were ready for any eventuality. The shuttle’s confines were a testament to the fact it had been built to ferry a dozen humans in restraint thrones – not two warriors of the Adeptus Astartes in full battle armour. Our jump packs threatened to clang against the walls each time we moved, and we would have to abandon the additional ammunition crates at our boots, but no matter.

Cyneric struck the bay release plate with a fist, admitting the roaring wind. We stepped out to meet it, falling through the sky.

As far as I am aware, I do not dream. If I do, perhaps I simply never recall what takes place in the theatre of my subconscious, but the result is the same. Many medical records cite humans referring to nightmares of falling, ending abruptly the moment before impact. I have always found that curious. Humanity is such a fragile condition, fearing every imaginable loss of control. Nightmares of falling makes even gravity a psychological enemy to them.

Fear. The rancid piss-stink of it. I cannot envision a more disgusting emotion.

High altitude insertions are no rarity among the Adeptus Astartes, even without drop pods. We leaned forward, diving hard, plunging through the gold spit of tracer fire that had no hope of ever hitting us. Cyneric fired his back-mounted boosters once, to veer clear of an Imperial Guard hulk rising from the fortress.

Altitude runes chimed and flared as the ground rose. My engines whined into life a moment later, slowing the descent enough that it wouldn’t be terminal. We landed with twin thuds, denting the landing platform and spreading a cobweb of cracks from each of our boots. The sky above us was alight with the whirring, revolving anti-air turrets automatically and

harmlessly tracking the inbound gunships and troop landers.

With portentous timing, a communication rune chimed on my retinal display the same moment my boots ground into the deck.

‘Reclusiarch? My lord… I demand an explanation for this.’

‘So ungrateful, Ekene.’ I found myself laughing for the first time since the cathedral came down upon me. ‘We thought you might appreciate the extra bodies.’

That day marked the first time I have ever been embraced by a human. Less than an hour after we landed, Cyneric and I walked outside the fortress walls, surveying the gathering battalions. Vulture gunships rattled overhead. The very air breathed with engine smoke from the idling tanks. Entire regiments of Steel Legion soldiers were packing munitions, and themselves, into Chimera transports and six-wheeled Shedu-class overlanders.

The man to embrace me was not, as one might have guessed, Captain Andrej of the Steel Legion. It was General Kurov – an otherwise distinguished and greying gentleman officer, who greeted me with a sabre at his hip and tears in his eyes.

‘Reclusiarch,’ he said by way of greeting. The embrace was swift, and surprising enough that I had no reaction to it. His head scarcely reached the heraldry on my chest before he stepped back, looking up at me. ‘The Hero of Helsreach calls, and his city answers.’

My skin still crawled in the aftermath of his nearness. His affection made sense, in that he was born, raised and trained in Helsreach; the War for Armageddon represented a bitter homecoming for him, and he held me in a paragon’s regard. Amazing, however, the difference in this meeting, and our very first. The levels of warmth in the latter, and coldness in the former, were difficult to align.

‘It is good you are here, general,’ I replied, trusting he would not be offended by my absolute neutrality.

Cyneric, sensing my unease, stepped to my side. ‘I am Cyneric,’ he greeted the general, looking down at the man, and I heard my brother’s dark little chuckle at the way Kurov performed the crusader’s cross rather than the Imperial aquila.

‘Such an effect you had on these men, sire,’ he voxed to me.

The war council that day was a blunt and brutal thing, as our plans were

ordained before a battalion of revving tanks. Guard officers crowded around Cyneric and myself, several of them touching my armour for good fortune in the coming fight. These I ignored, as I had ignored the embrace. Let them keep their strange superstitions if it would work to the betterment of morale.

‘Did you bring what I left in Helsreach?’ I asked Kurov, during a pause in proceedings.

He nodded in the affirmative, smiling to himself.

The plan was simple. We would march into the Mannheim Gap, and we would destroy anything that moved or breathed.

‘I like this plan.’ Andrej was sitting on the dozer blade of a gunmetal grey Chimera, thumping his ankles on the hazard-striped metal. His opinion was met with nods and murmurs of agreement from the gathered Legion officers, who stood at ease in their trenchcoats, helmets and gasmasks not yet fixed in place.

Ekene stood with me at the heart of the impromptu conclave, silent all the while. His anger was a palpable thing, an aura he bled in my direction. Only at the end did he speak, as if almost a hundred human officers were not nearby, and as if they had not just dedicated their lives to aiding his last charge.

‘You overstep your authority,’ he said to me. His helm’s vox speaker made the words a growl, though I suspected they needed little assistance in that regard.

‘I do as my duty bids. Nothing more, nothing less.’

He aimed a chainsword to the horizon, where the mountains rose and his brothers’ bodies rotted.

‘This is *our* fight.’

I could have struck him, knocking him to the ground for addressing me in such a tone. The temptation was there, and I certainly had the authority to do so. I refrained partly because I did not wish the Guardsmen to witness division in the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, and partly because I understood Ekene’s rage; even sympathised with it. It simply needed redirecting. Now was a time for me to be cold-blooded, not hot. He needed guiding, not beating and shaming.

‘It is still your fight,’ I told him. I doubted he had missed the way many of the Guard officers had clutches rifles tighter or rested their hands on their holstered pistols, when Ekene had addressed me with such aggression. ‘The

difference is, cousin, now it is a fight you can win.’

He turned – ever so subtly – to regard the crozius maul I had over one shoulder. I perceived the true nature of his complaint in that moment. It was not that I had summoned thousands of Guardsmen to aid his assault. The humans had nothing to do with it.

It was me. I was the source of his unease.

‘If we face the warlord…’ Ekene began, and I silenced him with a gentle gesture.

‘Vengeance will be yours, Lion. My duty is to get you to your prey. Honour demands you kill him yourself.’

‘That is all I ask, Reclusiarch. He must die to a Lion’s blade.’

‘Then see that he does.’

I turned back to the Guard officers, tasting the charcoal and promethium stink of so many idling engines, seeing the ochre-on-grey tide of their trenchcoats and battle tanks.

‘Speech!’ Andrej called. Laughter followed this demand. I waited until it subsided.

‘Not this time. This time, we go to war for honour and revenge, over survival. Such virtues need no speeches to enhance them, for they are inherently righteous. But I will say this.’

I hefted my war maul, sweeping it in a slow arc across the front line, encompassing every soldier, every vehicle, every supply crate.

‘You have all heard that almost five hundred Space Marines died in the canyon I have asked you to conquer today. The number is staggering, it defies belief. Why then do I request that you spend your blood and sweat in a battle that has already cost so many of my cousins their lives?

‘The answer, warriors of Helsreach, is not because I value your souls less than those of the Adeptus Astartes. It is not that I would waste your blood like coins of copper in a futile gamble. It is because you taught me the tenacious strength of the human spirit when my brothers bled for your city, and I can trust no other men and women to stand with us now. We answered you in your hour of need, and you have answered us in ours. For that, I thank you. We all thank you, Lion and Knight alike.

‘As for whether you will live to fight another day, I will speak the words of a much wiser man. My gene-sire, the Lord Rogal Dorn, primarch and son of the Emperor, said these words: *Give me a hundred Space Marines. Or*

failing that, give me a thousand other troops.'

I paused to take in the sight of the gathered masses again. This was a poor portion of Helsreach's full garrison, but given the complexities of orbital redeployment and transcontinental passage, it was a blessing to see so much flesh and iron under aquila banners.

'Look at your own numbers. By the war poetry of the Emperor's own blood-son, you are worth three times the number of Lions that fell at Mannheim. Cling to courage, no matter what madness awaits us in that canyon. You are here because I intend to win. And you are here because you *should* be here – you deserve, more than any others, to be on the battlefield the first time these relics go to war.'

General Kurov signalled to a Valkyrie gunship waiting nearby. The rear gangramp lowered on squealing hydraulics thirsting for oil, and three servitors lurched forward, bearing the relics of the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant in their cyborged grip. The first bore the great aquila statue on his shoulders, heaving it like a man condemned to carry his own crucifix. The second bore the tattered scraps of the city's founding charter high, the way a herald brings forth a war banner. The last carried a bronze globe of the fallen temple's blessed holy water. Mindless they marched, slaved to my will. How glad I was that I had left them in Helsreach rather than sending them up to the *Eternal Crusader.*

The humans cheered loud and long, raising rifles and bayonets to the cloudy sky. I was almost – almost – transported back on the city walls, as the green tide surged towards the city. *Our city. Our world. Our city. Our world.*

Grimaldus. Grimaldus. Grimaldus.

Cyneric's voice broke through the uproar of several thousand men and women chanting my name.

'I thought you said you would give no speech.'

'You have a great deal to learn about being a Chaplain,' I replied, 'if you consider that a speech.'

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IX

MANNHEIM

Any parsing of the archives on the *Eternal Crusader* will offer no shortage of detail on the events of the Second Mannheim Siege. It is fair to say, with the result so easily accessible, what matters most in this personal archive are the moments of heroism and humanity that led to the endgame. They are what I was asked to record, and I will endeavour to do so as my chronicle moves towards its conclusion.

What then, is thus far not recorded in the archives? All reports indicate the vast force and the exact regimental strength we hurled into that lethal ravine. Similarly, every report cites the immense force we encountered upon laying siege. Every hope we had possessed that Mannheim would be near devoid of enemy Titans was crushed before the first Steel Legion soldier had set foot on the loose rock slopes leading down into the canyon. Each prayer that the orks' infesting numbers would be culled by battles elsewhere were likewise shown to be wasted breath.

The enemy was present, and present in grotesque force. Great sockets in the rigging and stanchions along the canyon walls marked the absence of several Gargants, but many more were undergoing repair or reawakening after fighting in recent battles. The ravine was choked by living aliens going about their work, and thousands of mouldering corpses piled up into a sea of decaying organic matter. What foulness inspired them to leave their dead unburied? Was there no end to their pestilential influence?

Gold armour, darkened and soiled by waste, showed among the barricades of the looted dead. The dead Lions had been heaped in undignified repose with their xenos murderers, and their ceramite plate – useless to the

junkyard heresy that constituted greenskin technology – was left to encase the rotting warriors amidst their flesh cairns.

We advanced over this sea of the disrespected dead. Tearing the barricades down was not an option, leaving us to climb and wade and ride on the hulls of our tanks. *Grey Warrior* was the first to reach the mounds of the slain, its treads hauling its immense bulk up the corpse piles and grinding them into compacted meat beneath its weight. Lesser vehicles struggled manfully; others blasted holes in the dead-wall with their turret weapons; still others followed *Grey Warrior* and the super-heavies that led the way.

Above the advance rode the gunship fleet – Valkyries, Vultures and Vendettas, all flanking the four remaining Thunderhawks in the Lions' arsenal. The moment they streaked through the ravine's trench, cannonfire began to bring them down in tumbling fireballs.

Official chronometers cite the joining of battle with the first shot fired in anger at exactly five hours, thirty-one minutes and twelve seconds after dawn. That shot was a blast from the main armament of General Kurov's own *Grey Warrior.* From the Thunderhawk above, I saw that shot impact against the distended belly armour of an enemy Gargant, showering the nearby alien technicians with blazing wreckage.

Chronometers also cite that the engagement lasted a few minutes short of three hours. As one of the only Space Marines to survive the Second Mannheim Siege, I can confirm this is true: my helm's auto-senses recorded the same figure.

The Legion did not baulk at the sight of such a vast enemy horde. They ploughed into the enemy's disarrayed ranks, slaughtering them to make room on fields of their bodies for the gunships to land.

The first hours of that battle were remarkable only for their ferocity. There is nothing unique or worthy of remembrance in two armies grinding in a deadlock over their own dead. The Imperial Guard's massed cannonades devastated the greenskin war machines. In reply, the aliens butchered the Guard at every point along the advance where it fell to men and women with bayonets to hold the line. As is so often the way with the Guard, they had the stronger steel, but the enemy had the stronger flesh.

The orks fought for their mad religion and their even madder joy at butchery. The Guard fought because this was their world, and because they believed it was a battle worth fighting.

When human and ork blood runs together, the result is something as black and viscous as refined, thinned oil. By the third hour, each step through the canyon splashed in a river of mixed blood that had nowhere to run. The earth was too rocky to drink it, and the ravine itself was a natural basin. The land itself made a bowl for the blood we spilled in offering.

I saw Andrej, black to the knees, bayonetting an ork in the throat with two of his Legionaries. The corpse of their slain foe drifted away once they pulled their blades from its body – taken by the liquid muck. The smell of it, the sheer reek of the mixed-blood lake we were wading through, penetrated even Guard rebreathers. Soldiers constantly fell back to throw up when they could, or vomit where they stood and fought.

In such a grinding lock of armies, winning and losing is relative. We were pushing deep into the canyon, no different from a needle pushing into a boil and expelling the corruption within. But at what cost? Hundreds of men and women were falling face down into the dirt. Every second brought another crunching pop of a tank's engine catching fire and bursting its hull apart.

Andrej and his squad reached my side, using me as cover to reload their weapons. I killed the orks that reached for them, crushing the aliens' fungal bones with swing after swing.

My cenobyte servitors struggled at my side, too mindlocked to realise the efforts they were putting their muscles through. The artefacts of Helsreach were as filthy as its army, but time and again they rallied the Steel Legion to where I stood… whether I willed it or not. The orks seemed blind to the significance of my cyborged slaves, hunting only those of us who carried guns and blades.

Ekene reached us in the same time, and he turned his defence into a crude art of spinning and hacking with knife and chainsword, more like dancing than duelling. The Lion's armour was black with ooze. Breathlessness savaged his voice as he spoke through his helm's mouth grille.

'Do you still feel fortunate, Deathspeaker?'

'We still live, Ekene.' The chain binding my weapon to my armour was severed by a greenskin's axe, but I still held the maul in my hands. 'There is your answer.'

'And do you yet regret not sailing with your brothers?'

I executed an alien at my boots, caving in its chest with my maul. 'I *am* with my brothers,' I told the Lion. My voice was as rasping as his.

Andrej crouched in the slop, firing down the canyon at the aliens vaulting the next barricade.

‘The Reclusiarch is the luckiest man I know,’ he said with curious calm, not bothering to look away from the orks he was killing with beams of laser light from his hellgun. ‘A cathedral fell on him once, and still he is here, to ask me to run into a canyon full of monsters with him.’

None of us could say more. We were separated again by the charging enemy tide. I saw Andrej sprint for a passing Chimera, hauling himself up the side. Then he was gone.

War is psychology and momentum, more than fire and blood. The press of regiments and hordes against one another; the ebb and flow of advance and fall back. Every battle between mortal beings comes down to a fulcrum moment, when the balance threatens to shift irrevocably. It is the moment the warriors of one side see enough of the wider scheme to realise they are losing. Or, rather, that they believe they see enough – they bind themselves to the belief that their side will be defeated, or has achieved an unbreakable advantage.

This can come at any moment, striking at any soul upon the battlefield. A moment of imbalance only occurs when the individual’s actions inspire and influence those nearby.

It might be the front rank of soldiers fleeing an enemy they fear to attack, or charging headlong in pursuit of their foes’ broken ranks, against all mandate and wisdom. It could be the rearmost soldiers believing their lives will be wasted if they suffer the same fate as their kindred ahead, or pushing forward too fast and too far to reach the battle, preventing their fellows from attaining an otherwise sound tactical retreat. It could just as easily be a general viewing a rout from behind the lines, who waits a handful of seconds too long to assign orders of redeployment and counterattack. Or it could be one warrior, a champion, falling to enemy blades in view of his or her brothers and sisters; thus the champion’s death becomes the fulcrum on which the battle turns. In another life, on another world, a champion’s defiance turns a retreat into a killing charge; whether by deeds or by words he rallies his flagging kin.

I have seen every stripe of victory and defeat, always rising from this simple truth: war is psychology. This is the primary strength of the Space Marine Chapters that serve mankind. That they ‘know no fear’ is merely the

truth’s shadow. They devote their lives in absolution to training, training, training – forsaking all else in the quest for purity of purpose, in a life of war.

A front-line soldier sees nothing, *nothing*, of the wider battlefield. What he experiences around him is the entire reality in which he lives, and that is a flickering moment-by-moment assault of blades, shouting enemies and bleeding kindred. He makes judgements based upon these stimuli, and lives or dies by how he deals with them. This is why planning, communication, and trust change everything in war. With planning, you know where your brother-warriors should be elsewhere in the fight. With communication, you know how they fare as they fight away from you. With trust, you rely on them to survive and succeed, as they rely on you. Most important of all, you have eyes elsewhere in the dust, the chaos, the storm of blades and bolter shells. You know where your leaders wish you to be.

This is where Space Marines excel above all other mortal warriors. They live their lives in perfect trust of their battle-brothers. They possess more accurate and damage-resistant communication than any other human soldiers, down to the individual level. They are scourged of all emotion in battle, and trained to fight without concept of retreat until at last told to lower their weapons above the corpse of their slain foes.

This evolution is as much denial of flaw as addition of merit. Take a child, allow it to develop without ever understanding the frailties of human weakness, and force it to grow through ingesting nothing but the virtues of obedience, loyalty, and combat prowess. Surround it in ceramite. Arm it with fire. Tell it that it answers to no authority beyond its equally powerful, equally unrestrained brothers.

That is a Space Marine. Not a human trained to be a weapon, but a weapon with a human soul.

When the humans look upon us and cannot tell us apart but for the markings on our armour, this is why. We are hollow men by comparison to their brief, ignited lives of high passion and the weak, vulnerable frenzy of emotion.

It is not mockery of Guardsmen to acknowledge these fundamental truths of the Adeptus Astartes. It does the human men and women of our Imperium no disservice, nor does it exalt the warriors of the One Thousand Chapters to undeserved heights. We are the chosen, the Emperor’s Finest.

Those words have meaning, and these are the reasons why.

During the Helsreach Crusade, the fulcrum moment of so many battles rested on my shoulders. My knights would look to me for the word to charge or fall back; they would rally behind my cries, or withdraw at my silence. The human officers were reluctant to push too far ahead without my promise the Templars would join them; and most obvious of all, wherever I stood, the fighting was always at its thickest, whether I willed it or not. I hunted the enemy champions. I stood to stem the tide. But my heraldry drew alien commanders to me as often as I fought my way to them, and they would bellow their own inhuman names into my faceplate as we battled, so their brethren – and presumably, I – would know which alien champion was risking his life to slay me.

It happened again at Mannheim, though I did all I could to avoid it. Yet the fulcrum moment once more came down to me. The largest of the beasts, doubtless hunting me by heraldry, launched itself at me from the back of a bouncing, crashing truck of scrap iron.

How many tattooed, roaring warlords did we slay that day? An eidetic memory only allows perfect recall of the foes you face yourself. I cannot speak for the Steel Legion, or the Lions that fell in what may have been the longest three hours of my life.

Behind us lay a graveyard of tanks – practically all our own, all lost to enemy cannonfire. Lining the canyon's walls were the burning metal corpses of towering god-constructs, holed by missiles and tank shells, melting to slag in the flames of the Imperial Guard bombardment. Stubber fire rattled against our ceramite in a teeth-grinding drizzle, but scythed Guardsmen down in droves. Still we advanced, sloshing through the rising blood. It was knee-deep to most of the humans, turning all advancement into a sweating wade through filth. I wanted more of it. I wanted it to rise high enough to fill the ravine, and flood down into the cavern mouths, drowning any of the alien beasts that still hid below ground. I wanted to choke every living ork with lungfuls of this unholy fusion of blood from the just and unjust alike. Even the smell of it was wrong, like something alchemical and profane.

Before the warlord attacked, Cyneric carved his way to stand with me. His chainsword was a toothless ruin, welded into his fist by alien blood. His other arm ended at the elbow, severed in a ragged mess of cauterised meat

and sparking armour cables.

‘I do not know when it happened,’ he confessed, utterly unfazed.

‘Brother.’ I wanted to thank him for standing with me in this day of darkness, though it seemed a war without end, perhaps even fought for unsalvageable pride. ‘Brother.’

The alien overlord hit me from the side. I heard Cyneric’s warning scarcely a heartbeat before the thing struck, and then we went down together, rolling through the oily blood. It was a thing of blunt fangs, sinewy muscle and hammering limbs – larger than me, stronger than me, faster than me. Even confessing that gives me shame, but there are beasts and daemons in this galaxy more than a match for a single Adeptus Astartes warrior. Just as I accept my gifts, I must accept my limits.

I made it to my feet first, the maul still in my hand, and laid into the beast as it rose from the muck. Armour bent and wrenched aside. Dark blood made a mist in the stinking air, but it was far too late to worsen the smell of what we were all breathing in. The thing moved as if immune to everything I inflicted, reaching for me with its great iron claw.

‘Reclusiarch!’ I heard a Lion call from nearby. ‘He is Ekene’s kill!’

From striking in anger, I turned my blows to guard myself. The thing was wounded, but what are bruises and broken skin to a thing that size? Kurov – of all the soldiers who could ever have been so foolish – joined me with a useless slash of his sabre. The brute beast aimed a dismissive swipe at the general, blocked only by my maul less than a hand’s breadth from Kurov’s face. Sparks rained onto the general’s face, forming a cosmos of falling stars in his eyes.

‘Back away,’ I breathed, my arms trembling. ‘It’s not your fight.’

The general obeyed, thank the Emperor.

The next strike smashed me from my feet, for the beast launched himself at me a second time. Again, I was up first, casting about in the slime for my fallen crozius. Sure enough, when the overlord rose, he held my mentor’s war maul in his grip. It was a cudgel to him, a pathetic club with its length of severed chain. I backed away, shame burning with every retreating step.

Las-fire lanced into the creature, going ignored against its armour, and equally ignored as the volleys scored fingertip holes in its flesh. One of the Lions threw himself at the ork, only to be caught in his leap and compacted in the monster’s mangling claw. The warping of ceramite was the same

plaintive abuse of metal that sounds out as tanks melt in chemical fire.

The corpse was hurled aside. I had my pistol, drained of all power an hour before, and a metre of severed chain forming a useless whip. The thing, in its hulking iron plate armour, stalked forward through the marsh made by the blood of our companions.

Steel Legionaries were charging in, shouting wild cries, firing uselessly at close range. I ordered them back, both because they could do nothing to this beast, and because it would be disaster if, somehow, they did.

Cyneric threw himself onto the ork's back, slapping down with his fangless chainblade. Each blow shed sparks, but no blood. The warlord gave a carnosaur's bellow and threw my brother away into yet another mound of the sodden dead. I heard something give with a wet crunch over the vox, and I prayed – out loud and with no shame – it was not Cyneric's spine.

'Emperor's ghost.'

Throne of Mankind's Master, the thing spoke Gothic. Not well, not with any grace, but enough to convey meaning. Because of their mangled jaws, I understood precious few of the greenskin breed. This one was levelling my own mace at me, aiming at my face, and speaking my lord's name.

No, not at my face. At my faceplate. The Emperor's skullish, eternal visage. 'Emperor's ghost,' it said. '*Emperor's ghost.*' It had the tones of a Dreadnought, freshly woken from stasis frost. I had no conception, then or now, of how a living thing could speak with a volcano's voice.

'I am the living will of the Immortal Emperor,' I spoke through teeth as clenched as those of my avataric face mask. 'And you will pay for your transgressions against the armies of humanity.'

It came for me in a lumbering run. I moved aside, ducking and weaving, giving up yet more shameful ground. Lashing back with my chain-whip was loud but fruitless, as was the gunfire poured on in spurts by the Steel Legion. The las-fire became more sporadic; this close, they risked hitting me.

'Ekene…' I voxed, but managed nothing more. I caught the maul on the ninth swing, clutching its haft with every iota of energy I could burn from my aching flesh. The alien drove me to the ground, down to my knees, but to release my grip was to die by my own weapon.

The beast swung its other hand with a driving whine of overworked

servos. No dodging the claw – it crashed into the side of my armour, breeding the same wet crunches I'd heard from Cyneric – and hurling me aside into the muck. My retinal display told me the same as the pulses of pain dancing along my left side. Broken bones. Pain nullifying adrenaline injections. Warning runes chiming of biological trauma and armour damage. I ignored all of it. Ekene's kill or not, I would not tolerate this vile slug to wield my crozius.

Ekene came between us with a leap and a roar, neither of which would have shamed the great cat his bloodline was named for. He held a hand back, bidding me remain away, and forcing myself to obey was a yield I could never countenance in any other circumstance. But we had fought this battle for a bloodline's pride, and here was the moment of reckoning.

Ekene beat his blade against his chestplate, staring at the greenskin lord in its powered suit of tank armour scrap. Despite the sound of the battle above and around us, I heard his words as clearly as if they left my mouth instead of his.

'In whatever underworld your foul breed believes, you shall tell your pig-blooded ancestors that you died to the blade of Ekene of Elysium, Lion of the Emperor.'

I did not know, not then, that Ekene was the last Lion still standing.

Would it have changed anything, had I known? I cannot say.

Ekene attacked. His chainsword was worthless against the beast's claw; he had just as little hope of parrying my war maul with his combat knife. So what he lacked in strength, he poured into speed – never blocking, always dodging.

The battle did not pause around us. General Kurov, half of his face missing from the descent of some nameless, artless junkyard blade, blinked away blood as he sought to reload his pistol. His bodyguard of storm troopers fought around him, spearing out with bayonets and firing in closed ranks.

I saw no other Lions nearby. I heard none on the vox. None responded to my hails.

Cyneric, with bloody slime running in rivulets from his war-plate, tore his stained tabard free with his remaining hand, moving to my side. Together we slammed through the greenskins threatening to overwhelm Andrej and Kurov. I beat one to death with my fists, and strangled a second, feeling sick, primal joy at the life dying in its porcine eyes. Gasping, scrabbling

with its weakening talons against my faceplate, it died in my grip.

A hole flash-burned in the thing's forehead after I dropped it into the slime. Andrej, who had no hope of seeing my instinctive snarl behind my faceplate, raised his rifle in salute from a few metres away.

'Just in case,' he said.

'Do not do that again,' I growled.

Cyneric lifted his boot from the throat of another greenskin, a final stamp enough to crush whatever alien equivalent of a trachea it had possessed.

He chuckled as he watched it die. I have recorded elsewhere that what earned Cyneric his commendations to the Chaplaincy were his other numerous virtues and fervent insights, but in this personal accounting I can confess it was then, in that moment, as he laughed at the asphyxiating alien's pain, that I made my decision.

His hatred was pure – what lesser warriors might call cruel or gratuitous, a Chaplain considers holy. Cyneric belonged behind a skull helm.

'Where is the *Grey Warrior?'* I called to the general. He was up to his thighs in filth.

'Dead.' He turned his ruined face to me. I could see bone beneath the flesh wreckage, yet he was still grinning. 'We'll mourn her later, Reclusiarch. Captain! How long now?'

Andrej wrestled with an incendiary control pack over a comrade's shoulder, thumping it with a fist to straighten its readings.

'One minute. One hour. This is broken, okay, general? That is the truth, I–'

A Vulture gunship laboured above us, its central turbine coughing as it chewed ork bullets instead of breathing air. The thing fell, flames already breaking out across its steel skin, and I pulled the closest two soldiers with me as I threw myself to the side.

As they picked themselves up, one thanked me profusely. The other was Andrej, who did no such thing.

'That was a dramatic reaction, I am thinking. Yes. Yes, indeed.' He shook blood from his hellgun, and prayed to its machine-spirit that it would still fire after being submerged in the muck. The scattered squad came together again, around the gunship's wreckage.

More greenskins were barrelling their way closer. 'Kill them,' I ordered the Guardsmen, and turned to run back towards Ekene.

A burning Gargant close to the canyon's entrance broke from its gantries,

setting the ravine quaking as it crashed earthward. I felt the same bitter amusement that had gripped me as the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant came down in a hailstorm of marble and stained glass, but no laughter followed this time. The shaking earth bubbled the blood at our boots, and threw hundreds of soldiers from their feet. I kept running, Cyneric at my side.

Ekene and the warlord were still engaged, both bleeding from scores of wounds. The chainsword had licked out at armour joints and plunged into soft tissue; the power claw had mangled my cousin's armour each time it fell. He was backing away now, just as I had. Fighting such a beast was no task for one warrior alone, no matter the pleasure of pride.

Then came the electrical burst – a thunderclap like nothing else – turning the air to charged static. Orks and men in their droves cried out in pain at the sonic boom.

My helm protected me, though it chimed with alert runes at the sudden atmospheric instability. Serpents of lightning danced between my fingertips. The parchments on my shoulderguards caught fire. The air itself was alive with dispersing force. It felt as though I was inhaling the breath of another living being.

'The shield,' Cyneric cried, gripping my pauldron with his remaining hand. 'The orbital shield!'

I looked up, no longer seeing the mother-of-pearl distortion of the kinetic barrier energised in place above the canyon. At some point in the hours of melee, while I fought with the Lions, the Steel Legion had laid explosives at the void shield reactor. The Emperor alone knew when, where, and how. I had abandoned my delusions – and desires – of general command upon leaving the Helsreach in the hands of its Guard leaders.

No sooner had the shield imploded, spitting its static charges in all directions, than a powerful and priority channel vox-rune chimed loud on my retinal display.

I activated it, watching Ekene and the ork lord stagger around each other, wounded animals too proud to die.

'Brother,' came the voice, lifting my heart.

'You are still there.'

'For now. Not for much longer. Give the word if you require it, Merek. Just give the word.'

Helbrecht’s name-rune pulsed, red, gold, fierce. I broke into a run towards Ekene, replying as I moved.

‘Do it,’ I ordered my liege lord. ‘Blacken the sky.’

Ekene was down before I reached him. The beast clutched his arm in its mangling claw, crushing it at the bicep before ripping it free. He retaliated by ramming his chainsword in an awkward thrust into the creature’s throat. Deflected by armour, it barely bit. His assault came at the cost of his left leg, as the iron claw scissored through the limb at the knee, dropping him on his back into the slime.

I was on the beast’s back a heartbeat later, secure where one-armed Cyneric had been easily thrown, digging into the creature’s armour with my boots as I wrapped my weapon chain around its bleeding, sweating throat. The chain garrotted taut, and my broken bones throbbed in narcotic-dulled sympathy with the creaking, cracking sinew in the beast’s throat. The iron claw battered at me, shearing chunks of ceramite away. It staggered without toppling, gasped without truly suffocating. Even this – even strangling it with my last remaining weapon – could not kill it. All I could do was buy Ekene the moments he needed to crawl free.

He did. And Cyneric was waiting, a bolter in his remaining hand. The mutilated Lion reached up for it, clutching it one-handed in a pistol grip, and aimed it up as he lay back in the sludge.

I dropped back. Not completely, but enough to pull the chain tighter, adding my weight to my strength, and wrenching the beast’s head back to bare its throat.

I heard the bolter sing once, and the kick of something heavy striking near the chain. With a muffled burst, the head came free, tumbling back over its shoulders and landing with me in the filth. The armoured body stood there without anything existing above its neck – still too stubborn, too strong, to fall.

First I reclaimed my maul from its fingers. Then I tossed the thing’s slack-jawed head to Ekene where he lay.

The battle continued to rage, as the men and women I had led here fought their way further down the canyon.

With ideal atmospheric conditions, it takes less than two minutes between a drop pod’s launch and the impact of planetfall. Ekene was looking up at the darkening sky. I did not need to, nor did Cyneric. The Lion’s only

reaction was to rise as best he could, and pull his helmet clear.

‘Help me stand. I cannot meet the High Marshal on my back.’

Cyneric and I hauled Ekene up between us. While we did so, the vox link I shared with the Imperial Guard erupted in cheers, as Lord Helbrecht blackened the sky with Templar drop pods.

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EPILOGUE

FAREWELLS

Three events remain to account in this personal chronicle, away from the battlefield. These were my last acts before leaving Armageddon.

The first, such as it was, took three entire days and nights. I memorised the names and regiments of every Steel Legion soldier lost at the Mannheim Gap, and etched them myself onto a pillar of black marble, erected in the courtyard of the foundations that would become – in the years after we departed – a new Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.

I wrote each of the six thousand, eight hundred and eleven names myself, etching them in gold leaf script onto the black stone.

The inscription above the names read, in simple Low Gothic:

'Their names and deeds will be remembered, always, by the Emperor's own sons,
And by the city they saved.
Honoured for their sacrifice,
And respected for their courage.
These words are carved by Merek Grimaldus,
Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade, Son of Dorn, Hero of Helsreach.'

Among the inscribed names of the fallen were General Arvaley Kurov and Captain Andrej Valatok.

The second was the farewell offered to Chapter Master Ekene Dubaku of the Celestial Lions, escorted with his surviving few warriors onto the Black Templars strike cruiser *Blade of the Seventh Son,* with its course plotted for

the distant world Elysium.

His bionic leg clanked on the deck, and he still bore a limp, his physiology not entirely adjusted to the augmetic replacement yet. His armour was the gold war-plate of an ancient Imperial Fists champion, granted as a gift from the *Eternal Crusader*'s halls of memory. His cloak was that of Helbrecht's own Sword Brethren, red on black, elegantly cast over one shoulder. I had worn one of those cloaks once, in a luckier life. For all I knew, it had been the very one Helbrecht had granted to Ekene when he forced him to take the oath of lordship over his depleted Chapter.

The honour guard ready to bid him good journey consisted of myself, Cyneric, and the High Marshal's household knights, clad in ceremonial colours.

'Chapter Master.' I inclined my head in farewell. Cyneric did the same.

At Ekene's hip, bound by a chain of black iron, was the flayed, polished skull of the greenskin warlord we had killed together. My name rune was etched into the bone, as was Cyneric's, alongside Ekene's own mark. An honour indeed, to be named on a Chapter Master's prime trophy.

'It should feel petty,' he remarked, his dark face showing a smile, 'to take such overwhelming vengeance on the site that killed my brothers. But it does not. Thank you, both of you.'

Cyneric's skull helm dipped in further acknowledgement, but he said nothing. I could not resist a last lecture.

'Vengeance is never petty, Chapter Master. It does, however, sometimes serve better to strike with the aid of trusted brothers.'

He made the crusader's cross. 'I will remember that.'

I hope most fervently, as time passes, that his efforts in reconstructing the Celestial Lions and training the generation to follow him are going well.

We will never meet again. Ekene is sworn to a life of defending what he can hold, and the Black Templars always sail forth to attack.

The third and final event worthy of chronicling came in the very last hour before the *Eternal Crusader* departed Armageddon's orbit. I was alone in the Chamber of the First Proclamation, leaning on the guardrail before the great window overlooking the burning, wretched, priceless world beneath.

Bootsteps from behind did not draw my attention. Not until I realised there were two sets of them, and only one was twinned with the whirr of active

battle armour.

I turned, to see Cyneric escorting a human, who walked with his hands in his pockets. Humans did not come here. I could not recall the last time one had walked this hall. This one, however, seemed absolutely unimpressed, staring not at the relics, but only at me.

‘Hey. Yes, you. I am not dead, eh? You can see this, so very plainly. Go back down there and scratch out my name, yes? I demand satisfaction in this.’

Cyneric turned to leave, abandoning me to this moment of acute discomfort now his escorting duties were done. Because of his helm, I could not tell his humour in this matter, but I suspected he was enjoying it.

I was not.

‘You were listed in the rolls of the dead,’ I said, which was perfectly true.

The slender Steel Legionary raked his fingers back through his hair, one eye narrowed in… I could not tell exactly what emotion or expression it was meant to convey. He seemed angry, or distressed, or perhaps amazed.

‘Must I sing a song or perform a dance in this museum here to convince you I am not dead?’

‘Please do not do either of those things.’

‘No? Very well. I shall scratch out my name myself. Then perhaps I can collect my pay again, eh? They cease monthly credit wages once you are registered deceased, you know? Now I have a heroic name and no money. Your brother Cyneric brought me to you. He tells me you will fix this.’

The ship shivered underneath us.

Andrej’s eyes went wide.

‘No,’ he said, as if one man could simply speak a single word and shift the tide of inevitability. ‘No, no, no. The ship moves. This is unacceptable. If I fly away from the war, I will be shot as a deserter, and then I shall truly be dead. And,’ he added, looking past me at the globe below, ‘continue going unpaid.’

How could he be shot as a deserter if he was nowhere near his regiment? I did not understand the workings of his mind, and I was not sure what to say. So I said nothing.

‘Stop this ship, okay?’ He reached to adjust his goggles where they sat back on his helmet. ‘Yes. Do that, please. I am apologetic for my angry words.’

The *Crusader* gave another shudder. Dozens of decks away, thousands of slaves were feeding the furnaces, igniting the great power drives. We were already moving from high anchor. The stars began to drift.

‘If you run,’ I suggested, ‘you may reach a shuttle bay in time. I will vox clearance ahead of you.’

He nodded, a gleam in his eyes, beginning to back away towards the door. ‘Yes. Clearance. That will be good, eh? Where is the closest shuttle bay?’

‘Approximately two kilometres away, if you move straight down the ship’s central spinal thoroughfare.’

He hesitated, and went bloodlessly white. ‘Please be joking.’

‘You may wish to start running, captain.’

He looked at me, shook his head in some subtle human dismissal I could not entirely gauge, and started running.

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AT GAIUS POINT

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

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I

The memory of fire. Fire and falling, incineration and annihilation.

Then darkness.

Absolute silence. Absolute nothing.

II

I open my eyes.

There before me, outlined by scrolling white text across my targeting display, is a shattered metal wall. Its architecture is gothic in nature – a skeletal wall, with black steel girders like ribs helping form the wall's curvature. It is mangled and bent. Crushed, even.

I do not know where I am, but my senses are awash with perception. I hear the crackle of fire eating metal, and the angry hum of live battle armour. The sound is distorted, a hitch or a burr in the usually steady thrum. Damage has been sustained. My armour is compromised. A glance at the bio-feed displays shows minor damage to the armour plating of my wrist and shin. Nothing serious.

I smell the flames nearby, and the bitter rancidity of melting steel. I smell my own body; the sweat, the chemicals injecting into my flesh by my armour, and the intoxicatingly rich scent of my own blood.

A god's blood.

Refined and thinned for use in mortal veins, but a god's blood nevertheless.

A dead god. A slain angel.

The thought brings my teeth together in a grunted curse, my fangs scraping the teeth below. Enough of this weakness.

I rise, muscles of aching flesh bunching in unison with the fibre-bundle false muscles of my armour. It is a sensation I am familiar with, yet it feels somehow flawed. I should be stronger. I should exult in my strength, the ultimate fusion of biological potency and machine power.

I do not feel strong. I feel nothing but pain and a momentary disorientation. The pain is centralised in my spinal column and shoulder blades, turning my back into a pillar of dull, aching heat. Nothing is broken – bio-feeds have already confirmed that. The soreness of muscle and nerve would have killed a human, but we are gene-forged into greater beings.

Already, the weakness fades. My blood stings with the flood of adrenal stimulants and kinetic enhancement narcotics rushing through my veins.

My movement is unimpeded. I rise to my feet, slow not from weakness now, but from caution.

With my vision stained a cooling emerald shade by my helm's green eye lenses, I take in the wreckage around me.

This chamber is ruined, half-crushed with its walls distorted. Restraint thrones lie broken, torn from the floor. The two bulkheads leading from the chamber are both wrenched from their hinges, hanging at warped angles.

The impact must have been savage.

The… impact?

The crash. Our Thunderhawk crashed. The clarity of recollection is sickening… the sense of falling from the sky, my senses drenched in the thunder of descent, the shaking of the ship in its entirety. Temperature gauges on my retinal display rose slowly when the engines died in exploding flares that scorched the hull, and my armour systems registered the gunship's fiery journey groundward.

There was a final booming refrain, a roar like the carnosaurs of home – as loud and primal as their predator-king challenges – and the world shuddered beyond all sanity. The gunship ploughed into the ground.

And then… Darkness.

My eyes flicker to my retinal display's chronometer. I was unconscious for almost three minutes. I will do penance for such weakness, but that can

come later.

Now I breathe in deep, tasting the ashy smoke in the air but unaffected by it. The air filtration in my helm's grille renders me immune to such trivial concerns.

'Zavien,' a voice crackles in my ears. A momentary confusion takes hold at the sound of the word. The vox-signal is either weak, or the sender's armour is badly damaged. With the ship in pieces, both could be true.

'Zavien,' the voice says again.

This time I turn at the name, realising it is my own.

Zavien strode into the cockpit, keeping his balance on the tilted floor through an effortless combination of natural grace and his armour's joint-stabilisers.

The cockpit had suffered even more than the adjacent chamber. The view window, despite the thickness of the reinforced plastek, was shattered beyond simple repair. Diamond shards of the sundered false-glass twinkled on the twisted floor. The pilot thrones were wrenched from their support columns, cast aside like detritus in a storm.

Through the windowless viewport there was nothing but mud and gnarled black roots, much of which had spilled over the lifeless control consoles. They'd come down hard enough to drive the gunship's nose into the earth.

The pilot, Varlon, was a mangled wreck sprawled face-down over the control console. Zavien's targeting reticule locked onto his brother's battered armour, secondary cursors detailing the rents and wounds in the deactivated war plate. Blood, thick and dark, ran from rips in Varlon's throat and waist joints. It ran in slow trickles across the smashed console, dripping between buttons and levers.

His power pack was inactive. Life signs were unreadable, but the evidence was clear enough. Zavien heard no heartbeat from the body, and had Varlon been alive, his gene-enhanced physiology would have clotted and sealed all but the most grievous wounds. He wouldn't still be bleeding slowly all over the controls of the downed gunship.

'Zavien,' said a voice to the right, no longer over the vox.

Zavien turned from Varlon, his armour snarling in a growl of joint-servos. There, pinned under wreckage from the collapsed wall, was Drayus. Zavien moved to the fallen warrior's side, seeing the truth. No, Drayus was not just

pinned in place. He was impaled there.

The sergeant's black helm was lowered, chin down on his collar, green eyes regarding the broken Imperial eagle on his chest. Jagged wreckage knifed into his dark armour, the ravaged steel spearing him through the shoulder guard, the arm, the thigh and the stomach. Blood leaked through his helm's speaker grille. The biometric displays that flashed up on Zavien's visor told an ugly story, and one with an end soon to come.

'Report,' Sergeant Drayus said – the way he always said it – as if the scene around them were the most mundane situation imaginable.

Zavien kneeled by the pinned warrior, fighting back the aching need in his throat and gums to taste the blood of the fallen. Irregular and weak, a single heartbeat rattled in Drayus's chest. One of his hearts had shut down, likely flooded by internal haemorrhaging or burst by the wreckage piercing his body. The other pounded gamely, utterly without rhythm.

'Varlon is dead,' Zavien said.

'I can see that, fool.' The sergeant reached up one hand, the one not half-severed at the forearm, and clawed with unmoving fingers at the collar joint beneath his helm. Zavien reached to help, unlocking the helmet's pressurised seals. With a reptilian hiss, the helmet came free in Zavien's hands.

Drayus's craggy face, ruined by the pits and scars earned in two centuries of battle, was awash in spatters of blood. He grinned, showing blood-pinked teeth and split gums. 'My helm display is damaged. Tell me who is still alive.'

Zavien could see why it was damaged – both eye lenses were cracked. He discarded the sergeant's helm, and blink-clicked the runic icon that brought up the rest of the squad's life signs on his own retinal display.

Varlon was dead, his suit powered down. The evidence of that was right before Zavien's eyes.

Garax was also gone, his suit transmitting a screed of flat-line charts. The rangefinder listed him as no more than twenty metres away, likely thrown clear in the crash and killed on impact.

Drayus was dying, right here.

Jarl was…

'Where's Jarl?' Zavien asked, his voice harsh and guttural through his helm's vox speakers.

‘He’s loose.’ Drayus sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. His armour’s failing systems were feeding anaesthetic narcotics into his blood, but the wounds were savage and fatal.

‘My rangefinder lists him as a kilometre distant.’ Even with its unreliability compared to a tracking auspex, it was a decent enough figure to trust.

The sergeant’s good hand clenched Zavien’s wrist, and he glared into his brother’s eye lenses with a fierce, bloodshot stare. ‘Find him. Whatever it takes, Zavien. Bring him in, even if you have to kill him.’

‘It will be done.’

‘After. You must come back, after.’ Drayus spat onto his own chest, marking the broken Imperial eagle with his lifeblood. ‘Come back for our gene-seed.’

Zavien nodded, rising to his feet. Feeling his fingers curl in the need to draw weapons, he stalked from the cockpit without a backward glance at the sergeant he would never see alive again.

Jarl had awoken first.

In fact, it was truer to say that Jarl had simply not lost his grip on consciousness in the impact, for his restraints bound him with greater security than the standard troop-thrones. In the shaking thunder of the crash, he had seen Garax hurled through the torn space where a wall had been a moment before. He had heard the vicious, wet snap of destroyed vertebrae and ruined bone as Garax had crashed into the edge of the hole on the way out. And he had seen Zavien thrown from his restraint throne to smash sidelong into the cockpit bulkhead, sliding to the floor unconscious.

Enveloped in a force cage around his own restraint throne, Jarl had seen these things occurring through the milky shimmer-screen of electrical force, yet had been protected against the worst of the crash.

Ah, but that protection had not lasted for long. With the gunship motionless, with his brothers silent, with the Thunderhawk around him creaking and burning in the chasm it had carved in the ground, Jarl tore off the last buckles and scrambled over the wreckage of what had been his power-fielded throne. The machine itself, its generator smoking, reeked of captivity. Jarl wanted to be far from it.

He glanced at Zavien, stole the closest weapons he could find in the chaos

of the crash site, and ran out into the jungle.

He had a duty to fulfil. A duty to the Emperor.

His father.

Zavien's blade and bolter were gone.

Without compunction, he took Drayus's weapons from the small arming chamber behind the transport room, handling the relics with none of the care he would otherwise have used. Time was of the essence.

The necessary theft complete, he climbed from the wreck of the gunship, vaulting down to the ground and leaving the broken hull behind. In one hand was an idling chainaxe, the motors within the haft chuckling darkly in readiness to be triggered into roaring life. In the other, a bolt pistol, its blackened surface detailed with the crude scratchings of a hundred and more kill-runes.

Zavien didn't look at the smoking corpse of his gunship in some poignant reverie. He knew he would be back to gather the gene-seed of the fallen if he survived this hunt.

There was no time for sentiment. Jarl was loose.

Zavien broke into a run, his armour's joints growling at the rapid movement as he sprinted after his wayward brother, deep into the jungles of Armageddon.

III

They call it Armageddon.

Maybe so. There is nothing to love about this planet.

Whatever savage beauty it once displayed is long dead now, choked under the relentless outflow of the sky-choking factories that vomit black smog into the heavens. The skies themselves are ugly enough – a greyish-yellow shroud of weak poison embracing the strangled world below. It does not rain water here. It rains acid, as thin, weak and strangely pungent as a reptile's piss.

Who could dwell here? In such impurity? The air tastes of sulphur and machine oil. The sky is the colour of infection. The humans – the very souls we are fighting to save – are dead-eyed creatures without passion or life.

I do not understand them. They embrace their enslavement. They accept their confinement within towering manufactories filled with howling machines. Perhaps it is because they have never known freedom, but that is no true excuse to act as brain-killed as a servitor.

We fight for these souls because we are told it is our duty. We are dying, selling our lives in the greatest war this world has ever known, to save them from their own weakness and allow them to return to their lightless lives.

The jungle here… We have jungles on my home world, yet not like this.

The jungles of home are saturated with life. Parasites thrive in every pool of dark water. Insects hollow out the great trees to build their chittering, poisonous hives. The air, already swarming with stinging flies, is sour with the reptilian stench of danger, and the ground will shake with the stalking hunts of the lizard predator-kings.

Survival is the greatest triumph one can earn on Cretacia.

The jungle here barely deserves the name. The ground is clinging mud, leaving you knee-deep in sulphuric sludge. What ragged life breathes the unclean air is weak, irritating, and nothing compared to the threats of home.

Of course, the jungles here possess a danger not even remotely native to the planet itself. They swarm with the worst kind of vermin.

With the planet locked in the throes of invasion, I am all too aware of what brought down our Thunderhawk.

A pack of them hunted up ahead.

As soon as he heard their piggish snarls and barking laughter, Jarl's tongue ached with a raw, coppery urgency. His teeth itched in their sockets, and he felt his heartbeat in the soft tissue around his incisors.

His splashing sprint through the jungle became a hunched and feral stride, while the chainblade in his grip growled each time he gunned the trigger. Small arms fire rattled in his direction even before he cleared the line of trees. They knew he was coming, he made sure of that.

Jarl ignored the metallic rainfall of solid rounds clanging from his war plate. The trees parted and revealed his prey – six of them – hunkered around a tank made of scavenged, rusted scrap.

Greenskins. Their fat-mouthed pistols crashing loud and discordant, their brutish features illuminated by the flickering of muzzle flashes.

Jarl saw none of this. His vision, filtered through targeting reticules, saw

only what his dying mind projected. A far greater enemy, the ancient slaves of the Ruinous Powers, feasting on the bodies of the loyal fallen. Where Jarl ran, the skies were not the milky-yellow of pus, but the deep blue of nightfall on ancestral Terra. He did not splash through black-watered marshland. He strode across battlements of gold while the world ended around him in a storm of heretical fire.

Jarl charged, his scream rendered harsh and deafening by his helm's vocalisers. The chainsword's throaty roar reached an apex in the moment before it was brought down onto the shoulder of the first ork.

The killing fury brought darkness again, but the blackness now was awash with blessed, sacred red.

Zavien heard the slaughter. His pace, already at a breakneck sprint through the vegetation, intensified tenfold.

If he could catch Jarl, catch him before his brother made it to Imperial lines, he would avert a catastrophe of innocent blood and the blackest shame.

His red and black war plate – the dark red of arterial blood, the black of the void between worlds – was a ruined mess of burn markings, silver gougings where damage in the crash had scored away the paint from the ceramite's surface, and mud-spattered filth as he raced through the swamp.

Yet when one carries the pride of a Chapter on one's shoulders, necessity lends strength to aching limbs and the false muscles of broken armour.

Zavien burst into the clearing where his brother was embattled. His trigger fingers clenched at once – one unleashing a torrent of bolter shells at his brother's back, the other gunning the chainaxe into whirring, lethal life.

'Jarl!'

Treachery.

What madness was this? To be struck down by one's own sons? Sanguinius, the Angel of Blood, turns from the twisted daemons he has slain and dismembered. One of his own sons screams his name, charging across the golden battlements while the heavens above them burn.

The primarch cries out as his son's weapon speaks in anger. Bolt shells crack against his magnificent armour. His own son, one of his beloved Blood Angels, is trying to kill him.

This cannot be happening.

And, in that moment, Sanguinius decides it is not. There is heresy at work here, not disloyalty. Blasphemy, not naked betrayal.

'What foulness grips you!' the Angel cries at his false son. 'What perversion blackens the soul of a Blood Angel and warps him to serve the Archenemy?'

'Sanguinius!' the traitor son screams. 'Father!'

Zavien roared Jarl's name again, not knowing what his brother truly heard. The cries that returned from his brother's vox-amplifiers chilled his blood – a bellowed, clashing litany of archaic High Gothic and the tongue of Baal that Jarl had never learned.

Surrounded by the ravaged bodies of dead greenskins, the two brothers came together. Zavien's first blow was blocked, the flat of Jarl's chainblade clashing against the haft of his axe. Jarl's armour was pitted and cracked with smoking holes from the impact of bolt shells, yet his strength was unbelievable. Laughing in a voice barely his own, he hurled Zavien backwards.

Unbalanced by his brother's insane vigour, Zavien fell back, rolling into a fighting crouch, shin-deep in marshwater.

Again, Jarl shouted in his unnerving, ancient diction – words Zavien recognised but did not understand. As with Jarl, he had never learned Baalian, and never studied the form of High Gothic spoken ten thousand years before.

'Let this not be your end, my son. Join me! We will take the fight to Horus and drown his evil ambitions in the blood of his tainted warriors!'

Sanguinius removes his helm – a sign of honour and trust despite the war raging around them – and smiles beneficently at his wayward son. His benevolence is legendary. His honour without question.

'It need not be this way,' the Angel of Blood says through his princely smile. 'Join me! To my father's side! For the Emperor!'

Zavien stared at his brother, barely recognising Jarl's face in the drooling, slack-jawed grin that met his gaze. His brother's features were red; a shining wetness from eyes that cried blood.

A meaningless screed of syllables hammered from Jarl's bleeding mouth.

It sounded like he was choking on his own demented laughter.

‘Brother,’ Zavien spoke softly. ‘You are gone from us all.’

He rose to his feet, casting aside the empty bolt pistol. In his red gauntlets, he clutched the chainaxe two-handed, and stared at the brother he no longer knew.

‘I am not your son, Jarl, and I am no longer your brother. I am Zavien of the Flesh Tearers, born of Cretacia, and I will be your death if you will not let me be your salvation.’

Jarl heaved a burbling laugh, bringing bloody froth to his lips as he wheezed in a language he shouldn’t know.

‘You disgrace my bloodline,’ the Angel said with infinite sorrow, his godlike heart breaking at the blasphemy before his eyes. ‘The Ultimate Gate calls to me. A thousand of your masters will fall by my blade before they gain entrance to the Emperor’s throne room. I have no more patience for your puling heresy. Come, traitor. Time to die.’

Sanguinius unfurled his great white wings, pearlescent and sunlight-bright in the firestorm wreathing the battlements. With tears in his eyes, tears of misery at the betrayal of one of his own sons, he launched forward to end this blasphemy once and for all.

And I realise I cannot beat him.

When we are shaped into what we are, when we are denied our humanity to become weapons of war, it is said that fear is purged from our physical forms, and triumph is bred into our bones. This is an expression, an attempt at the kind of crude verse forever attributed to the warrior-preachers of the Adeptus Astartes.

It is true that defeat is anathema to us.

But I cannot beat him. He is not the warrior I trained with for decades, not the brother whose every move I can anticipate.

His chainblade, still wet with green gore, arcs down. I block, barely, and am already skidding back in the sulphuric mud. His strength is immense. I know why this is. I am aware of the… the genetic truths at play. His mind cannot contain his delusional fury. He is using everything he has, *everything*, powering his muscles with more force and expending more energy than a functioning mind can allow. I can smell the alkaline reek of

his blood through the damage in his armour – combat narcotics are flooding his system in lethal quantities. In his madness, he cannot stem the flood of battle narcotics fusing with his bloodstream.

His strength, this godly power, will kill him.

But not quickly enough.

A second deflected slice, a third, and a fourth that crashes against my helm; a blocked headbutt that crunches into my bracer and dulls my arm; a kick that hammers into my chestplate even as I lean aside to dodge.

A thunderclap. My vision spins. Fire in my spine.

I think my back is broken. I try to say his name, but it comes out as a scream.

Rage, black and wholesome, its tendrils bearing the purest intent, creeps in at the edge of my vision.

I hear him laughing and damning me in a language he shouldn't know.

Then I hear nothing except the wind.

Sanguinius lifts the traitor with contemptuous ease.

Held above his head, the blasphemer thrashes and writhes. The Angel of Blood stalks to the edge of the golden battlements, laughing and weeping all at once at the carnage below. It is a tragedy, but it is also beautiful. Mankind using its greatest might and achievements as it attempts to engineer its own demise. Titans duel in their hundreds, with millions of men dying around their iron feet. The sky is on fire. The entire world smells of blood.

'Die,' the Angel curses his treacherous son with a beauteous whisper, and hurls him from the battlements of the Imperial Palace into the maelstrom of war hundreds of metres below.

Freed of his burden and his bloodline's honour restored, the Angel in gold makes haste away.

His duty is not yet done.

IV

Consciousness returned with the first impact.

A jarring crunch of armour against rock jolted Zavien from his lapse into

the murky haze of near-unconsciousness. Feeling himself crashing down the cliff side, he rammed his hand down hard into the rock – a claw of ceramite clutching at the stone. The Astartes grunted as his arms snapped straight, taking his weight, arresting his tumbling fall.

Damage runes flicked up on his retinal display, a language of harsh white urgency. Zavien ignored them, though it was harder to ignore the pain throughout his body. Even the injected chemical anaesthetic compounds from his armour and the nerve-dulling surgery done to him couldn't entirely wash it away. That was a bad sign.

He clawed his way back up the cliff, teeth clenched, gauntlets tearing handholds into the stone where nature hadn't provided any.

Once at the top, the Flesh Tearer retrieved the chainaxe that had flown from his grip, and broke into a staggering run.

He almost killed me.

That is a hard truth to swallow, for we were evenly matched for all of our lives. My armour is damaged, operating at half capacity, but it still lends me strength as I run. Behind me, the wrecked greenskin tank remains alone, its crew slain, the rest of its missiles aiming into the sky with no one to fire them.

Curse those piggish wretches for bringing down our gunship.

I run on, gathering speed, slowing only to hack hanging vegetation from my path.

I recall the topography of this region from the hololithic maps at the last war council. The mining town of Dryfield is to the east. Jarl's rage-addled mind will drive him to seek out life. I know where he is going. I also know that unless something slows him down…

He will get there first.

Sister Amalay D'Vorien kissed the bronze likeness of Saint Silvana, and let the necklace icon fall back on its leather cord. The weak midday sun, what brightness penetrated the gauzy, polluted cloud cover, was a dull presence in the heavens, only occasionally reflecting glare off the edges of Promethia, the squad's Immolator tank.

Her own armour was once silver, now stained a faint, dull grey from exposure to the filthy air of this world. She licked her cracked lips, resisting

the desire to drink from the water canteen inside the tank. Second Prayer was only an hour before, and she'd slaked her thirst with a mouthful of the brackish water, warmed as it was by the tank's idling engine.

'Sister…' called down Brialla from the Immolator's turret. 'Did you see that?'

Amalay and Brialla were alone while the rest of their squad patrolled the edges of the jungle. Their tank idled on the dirt road, with Amalay circling the hull, bolter in hand, and Brialla panning her heavy flamers along the tree lines.

Amalay whispered a litany of abasement before duty, chastising herself for letting her mind wander to thoughts of sustenance. Her bolter up and ready, she moved around to the front of the Immolator.

'I saw nothing,' she said, eyes narrowed and focused. 'What was it?'

'Movement. Something dark. Remain vigilant.'

There was a tone colouring Brialla's voice, on the final words. A suggestion of disapproval. Amalay's laxity had been noticed.

'I see nothing,' Amalay spoke again. 'There's… No, wait. *There.*'

The 'something' broke from its crouch in the vegetation at the tree line. A blur of crimson and black, with a chainblade revving. Amalay recognised an Astartes instantly, and the threat a moment later. Her bolter barked once, twice, and dropped from her hands to clatter to the dirt. The gun crashed once more from its vantage point on the ground, a loud boom that hammered a shell into the tank's sloped armour plating.

Even as this last shot was fired, Amalay's head flew clear of her shoulders, white hair catching the wind before the bleeding wreckage rolled into the undergrowth.

Brialla blasphemed as she brought the flamer turret around on protesting mechanics, and wrenched the handles to aim the cannons low.

The Astartes was cradling Amalay's headless body, speaking to it in a low snarl. Her sister was already dead. Brialla squeezed both triggers.

Twin gouts of stinking chemical flame roared from the cannons, bathing Amalay and the Astartes in clinging, corrosive fire. She was already whispering a lament for her fallen sister, even as she blistered the armour and skin from Amalay's bones.

It was impossible to see through the reeking orange miasma. Brialla killed the jets of flame after seven heartbeats, knowing whatever had been washed

in the fire would be annihilated, purged in the burning storm.

Amalay. Her armour blackened, its joints melted, her hands reduced to blackened bone. She lay on the ground, incinerated.

A loud thud clanged on the tank's roof behind Brialla. She turned in her restraint throne, the slower turret cycling round to follow her gaze. Already, she was trying to scramble free of her seat.

The Astartes was burning. Holy fire licked at the edges of his war-plate, and his joints steamed. He eclipsed the sun, casting a flickering shadow over her. His armour was black, charred, but not immolated. As she hauled herself out of her restraints, he levelled a dripping chainsword at her face.

'The Flesh Tearers!' she screamed into the vox-mic built into her armour's collar. 'Echoes of Gaius Point!'

In anciently-accented Gothic, her killer said six whispered words.

'You will pay for your heresy.'

I watch from the shadows of the trees.

The Sororitas are tense. While one of them performs funerary rites over the destroyed bodies of their sisters, three others stalk around the hull of their grey tank, bolters aimed while they stare into the jungle through gunsights.

I can smell the corpses beneath the white shrouds. One is burned, cooked by promethium chemical fire. The other had bled a great deal before she died, torn to pieces. I do not need to see the remains to know this is true.

For now, I hide, crouched and hidden. The jungle masks the ever-present charged hum of my armour from their weak, mortal ears, while I listen to fragments of their speech.

Jarl's trail has grown cold, even the smell of his potent blood lost in the billion scents of this sulphuric jungle. I need focus. I need direction.

But as soon as I draw near enough to see the sisters' steel-grey armour and the insignias of loyalty they each wear, I curse my fortune.

The Order of the Argent Shroud.

They were with us at Gaius Point.

Echoes of that battle will haunt us all until the Chapter's final nights.

'My auspex senses something,' I hear one of them say to her sisters. I make ready to move again, to taste shame and flee. I cannot confront them like this. They must not know of our presence. 'Something alive,' she says.

‘And with a power signature.’

‘Flesh Tearer!’ one of the sisters calls out, and my blood freezes in my veins. It is not fear I feel, but true, sickening dread as she uses our Chapter’s sacred name. *How can they know?*

‘Flesh Tearer! Show yourself! Face the Emperor’s judgement for the barbarity of your tainted Chapter!’

My teeth clench. My fingers quiver, then grip the chainaxe tighter. *They know.* They know a Flesh Tearer did this. Their wretched slain sisters must have warned them.

Another female voice, the one carrying the auspex scanner, adds to the first one’s cries. ‘We were at Gaius Point, decadent filth! Face us, and face retribution for your heresy!’

They know what happened at Gaius Point. They saw our shame, our curse, and the blood that ran that day.

They believe I butchered two of their sisters here, and now lay the sins of my brother Jarl upon my shoulders.

Gunfire rings out. A bolter shell slices past my pauldron, shredding vegetation.

‘I see him,’ a female voice declares, ‘There!’

My trigger finger strokes the Engage rune on the chainaxe’s haft. After a heartbeat’s hesitation, I squeeze. Jagged, whirring teeth cycle into furious life. The weapon cuts air in anticipation of the moment it will eat flesh.

They *dare* blame me for this…

They open fire.

I am not a heretic.

But this must end.

V

Zavien reached Dryfield just as the sun was setting.

He had left the jungle behind three hours before. The lone warrior’s run came to an end at the fortified walls – outside the mining settlement, he heard no sound from within, only the desperate howl of the wind across the wasteland.

Hailing the walls, calling for sentries, earned him no response.

The settlement’s gates were sealed: a jury-rigged amalgamation of steel bars, flakboard and even furniture piled high behind the double doors in the wall ringing the village. These pitiful defences were the colony’s attempts to reinforce their walls against the ork hordes sweeping across the planet.

With neither the time nor the inclination to hammer the gates open through force, Zavien mag-locked his axe to his back and punched handholds in the metal wall itself, dragging himself to the ramparts fifteen metres above.

The village was a collection of one-storey buildings, perhaps enough to house fifteen families. A dirt track cut through the village’s centre like an old scar; evidence of the supply convoys that made it this far out from the main hives, and the passage of ore haulers who came to profit from the local copper mine. Low-quality metal would be in great demand by the planet’s impoverished citizens, who could afford no better.

The largest building – indeed, the only one that was more than a hut made from scrap – was a spired church bedecked in crudely-carved gargoyles.

Zavien acknowledged all of this in a heartbeat’s span. The Astartes scanned the ramshackle battlements around the village, then turned to stare at the settlement itself.

No sign of movement.

He walked from the platform, falling the fifteen metres to the ground and landing in a balanced crouch.

He came across the first body less than a minute later.

A woman. Unarmed. Slumped against the wall of a hovel, a blood-smear decorating the wall behind her. She was carved in half, and not cleanly.

The wide streets between the ramshackle huts and homes were decorated with trails of blood and the tracks of weight dragged through the dirt. All of these led to the same place. Whomever had come here and slain the colonists had dragged the bodies to the modest church with its shattered windows and corroded walls of flakboard and red iron.

Zavien’s retinal locator display was finally picking up faint returns from Jarl’s war plate. His brother was inside, no longer running. And from the silence, no longer killing.

The Flesh Tearer stalked past the weaponless corpse, limp in its lifeless repose, slain by his own sword in his brother’s hands. Zavien had seen such things before – they were images he would never forget while he still drew breath.

He felt cold, clinging shame run through his blood like a toxin. Just like at Gaius Point.

It wasn’t supposed to happen.

At Gaius Point.

It was never supposed to happen.

That night, they had damned themselves forever.

It should have been a triumph worthy of being etched onto the armour of every warrior that fought there.

The Imperial front line was held by the Point’s militia and the Order of the Argent Shroud, who had rallied the people of the wasteland town into an armed fighting force and raised morale to fever pitch through their sermons and blessings in the name of the God-Emperor.

The greenskins descended in a swarm of thousands, hurling themselves at the town’s barricades, their mass forming a sea of bellowing challenges, leathery flesh and hacking blades.

At the battle’s apex, the Sisters and the militia were on the edge of being overwhelmed. At last, and when it mattered most, Gaius Point’s frantic distress calls were answered.

They came in Thunderhawks, boosters howling as they soared over the embattled horde. The gunships kissed the scorched earth only long enough to deploy their forces: almost two hundred Astartes in armour of arterial red and charcoal black. The rattling roar of so many chainblades came together in a ragged, ear splitting chorus, sounding like the war-cry of a mechanical god.

Zavien was in the first wave. Alongside Jarl and his brothers, he hewed left and right, his blade’s grinding teeth chewing through armour and bloody, fungal flesh as the sons of Sanguinius reaped the aliens’ lives.

The orks were butchered in droves, caught between a hammer and anvil, being annihilated from behind and gunned down from the front.

Zavien saw nothing but blood. Xenos blood, stinking and thick, splashing across his helm. The smell of triumph, the reek of exultant victory.

He was also one of the first to the barricades.

By then, he couldn’t see. He couldn’t think. His senses were flooded by stimuli, all of it aching, enticing and maddening. He tried to speak, but it tore from his lips as a cry aimed at the polluted skies. Even breathing did

nothing but draw the rich scent of alien blood deeper into his body, disseminating it through his system. To be so saturated by xenos taint ignited a fire in his mind, tapping into the gene-deep fury that forever threatened to overwhelm him.

Driven on by the ceaseless urge to drown his senses in the purity of enemy blood, Zavien disembowelled the last ork before him, and vaulted the barricade. He had to kill. *He had to kill.* He was born for nothing else.

He and his brothers had been fighting in ferocious hand-to-hand battle for two hours. The enemy was destroyed. The joyous cheers of the militia died in thousands of throats as, in a wave of vox-screams and howling chainswords, half of the Flesh Tearers broke the barricades and ran into the town.

With no foes to slay, the Astartes turned their rage upon whatever still lived.

The Angel mourned the slain.

Their deaths were a dark necessity on the path to redemption. The prayers he chanted to the ceiling of the Emperor's throne room inspired tears in his eyes, and tears in the eyes of the thousands of loyal soldiers staring on.

'We must burn the slain,' he whispered through the silver tears. 'We must forever remember those who died this day, and remember the foulness that turned their hearts against us.'

'Sanguinius!' a voice cried from behind. It echoed throughout the chamber, where a million banners hung in the breezeless air, marking every regiment ever sworn to fight and die for the young Imperium of Man.

The Angel tilted his head, the very image of patient purity.

'I thought I killed you, heretic.'

'Jarl!'

Wheezing, mumbling, with bloody saliva running in strings from his damaged mouth grille, Jarl staggered around to face his brother.

What burbled from his mouth was a mixture of languages, wet with the blood in his throat. The chemical reek of Jarl's body assaulted Zavien's senses even over the smell of his brother's burned armour and the reek of the slain. The combat narcotics flooding Jarl's body were eating him alive.

Zavien did nothing but stare for several moments after he called his

brother’s name. The dead were everywhere, piled all across the floor of the church, a slumbering congregation of the slaughtered. Perhaps a hundred of them, all dragged here after the carnage. Perhaps many of them had been found here in worshipful service, and only half the village had needed to be dragged. Trails of streaked, smeared blood marked the floor.

‘Burn the bodies,’ Jarl said in grunted Cretacian, the tongue of their shared home world, amongst a screed of words Zavien couldn’t make out. ‘Purge the sin, burn the bodies, cleanse the palace.’

Zavien raised his chainaxe. In sickening mirror image, his blood-maddened brother raised his dripping chainsword.

‘This ends now, Jarl.’

There was a bark of syllables, a drooling mess of annihilated words.

The Angel raised his golden blade.

He had been so foolish. This was no mere heretic. Had he been blinded all along? Yes… the machinations of the tainted traitors had shrouded his golden eyes from the truth. But now… Now he saw everything.

‘Yes, Horus,’ he said with a smile that spoke of infinite regret. ‘It ends now.’

VI

The brothers met in the defiled church, their boots struggling to grip the mosaic-laid floor, awash as it was with innocent blood. The whining roar of chainblades was punctuated by crashes as the weapons met. Jagged teeth shattered with every block and parry, clattering against nearby wooden pews as they were torn from their sockets.

Zavien’s blood hammered through his body, tingling with the electric edge of combat stimulants. Jarl was a shadow of the warrior he had been – frothing at the mouth, raving at allies that didn’t exist, and half-crippled by the lethal battle-drug overdose that was burning out his organs.

Zavien blocked his brother’s frantic, shaking cuts. Every time his axe fell, he’d carve another chasm into Jarl’s armour. Ultimately, only one warrior was aware enough to know this would never be settled by chainblades.

With a last block and a savage return, Zavien smashed Jarl’s blade aside

and kicked it from his grip. Its engine stuttered to a halt, resting on the tiled ground. Jarl watched it fly from his grip with delayed, bleeding vision.

Before he could recover, Zavien's hands were at his throat. The Flesh Tearer squeezed, his hands crunching into Jarl's neck, collapsing the softer joint-armour there and vicing into the flesh beneath.

Jarl fell to his knees as his brother strangled him. His gene-enhanced physiology was poisoned by both the curse and the narcotics, and his sight began to darken as his body could take no more punishment.

Darken, yet clear.

Deprived of air, unable to even draw a shred of breath, he mouthed a voiceless word that never left the confines of his charred helm.

'Zavien.'

Zavien wrenched his grip to the side, snapping the bones of his brother's-spine, and still strangling.

He stood like this for some time. Night had fallen before the warrior's gauntlets released their burden and Jarl's body finally slumped to the ground.

There the madman rested, asleep among those he had slain.

'It is done,' Zavien spoke into his squad's vox channel, his eyes closed as only silence replied.

'Jarl is dead, brothers. It is done.'

He chose to finish what his brother had begun. Even in madness, there sometimes hides a little sense.

The bodies had to be burned. Not to purify any imagined heresy, but to hide the evidence of what had happened here.

It was never supposed to happen. Here, or at Gaius Point. They had damned themselves, and all that remained was to fight as loyally as they could before righteous vengeance caught up with them all.

As the church burned, pouring thick black smoke into the polluted sky, the sound of engines grumbled from the horizon.

Orks. The enemy was finally here.

Zavien stood among the flames, immune to them, his axe in his hand. The fire would draw the aliens closer. There was no way he could defend the whole village against them, but the thought of shedding and tasting their blood before he finally fell ignited his killing urge.

His fangs ached as the vehicles pulled in to a halt outside.

No.

Those engine sounds were too clean, too well-maintained. It was the enemy. But it was not the greenskins.

I walk from the church, the broken axe in my hand.

There are twenty of them. In human unison, impressive enough even if it lacks the perfection of Astartes unity, they raise their bolters. The Sisters of the Order of the Argent Shroud. The silver hulls of their tanks and their own armour are turned a flickering orange-red in the light of the fire that should have hidden our sins.

Twenty guns aim at me.

The thirst fades. My hunger to taste blood trickles back into my throat, suddenly ignorable.

‘We were at Gaius Point,’ the lead sister calls out. Their eyes are narrowed at the brightness of the flame behind me.

I do not move. I tell them, simply:

‘I know.’

‘We have petitioned the Inquisition for your Chapter’s destruction, Flesh Tearer.’

‘I know.’

‘That is all you have to say for yourself, heretic? After Gaius Point? After killing the squad of our sister Amalay D’Vorien? *After massacring an entire village?*’

‘You came to pass judgement,’ I tell her. ‘So do it.’

‘We came to defend this colony against your wretched blasphemy!’

They still fear me. Even outnumbered and armed only with a shattered axe, they still fear me. I can smell it in their sweat, hear it in their voices, and see it in their wide eyes that reflect the flames.

I look over my shoulder, where Jarl’s legacy burns. Motes of amber fire sail up from the blaze. My brother’s funeral pyre, and a testament to what we have all become. A monument to how far we have fallen.

We burn our dead on Cretacia. Because so many are killed by poisons and beasts and the predator-king reptiles, it is a mark of honour to die and be burned, rather than be taken by the forest.

It was never meant to be like this. Not here, and not at Gaius Point.

Twenty bolters open fire before I can look back.

I don’t hear them. I don’t feel the wet, knifing pain of destruction.

All I hear is the roar of a Cretacian predator-king, the fury rising from its reptilian jaws as it stalks the jungles of my home world. A carnosaur, black-scaled and huge, roaring up to the clear, clean skies.

It hunts me. It hunts me now, as it hunted me so long ago, at the start of this second life.

I reach for my spear, and…

Zavien clutches the weapon against his chest.

‘It is death itself,’ he grunts to his tribal brothers as they crouch in the undergrowth. The tongue of Cretacia is simple and plain, little more than the rudiments of true language. ‘The king-lizard is death itself. It comes for us.’

The carnosaur shakes the ground with another slow step closer. It breathes in short sniffs, mouth open, jaws slack, tasting the air for scents. A grey tongue the size of a man quivers in its maw.

The spear in his steady grip is the one he made himself. A long shaft of dark wood with a fire-blackened point. He has used it for three years now, since his tenth winter, to hunt for his tribe.

He does not hunt for his tribe today. Today, as the sun burns down and bakes their backs, he hunts because the gods are in the jungle, and they are watching. The tribes have seen the gods in their armour of red metal and black stone, always in the shadows, watching the hunting parties as they stalk their prey.

If a hunter wishes to dwell in paradise among the stars, he must hunt well when the gods walk the jungles.

Zavien stares at the towering lizard-beast, unable to look away from its watery, slitted red eye.

He shifts his grip on the spear he crafted.

With a prayer that the gods are bearing witness to his courage, he throws the weapon with a heartfelt scream.

The Flesh Tearer crashed to the bloodstained ground, face down in the dust.

‘Cease fire,’ Sister Superior Mercy Astaran said softly. Her sisters obeyed immediately.

‘But he still lives,’ one of them replied.

This was true. The warrior was dragging himself with gut-wrenching slowness, one-armed and with a trembling hand, through the dirt. A dark trail of broken armour and leaking lifeblood pooled around him.

He raised his shaking hand once more, dug the spasming fingers into the ground, and dragged himself another half-metre closer to the burning church’s front door.

‘Is he seeking to escape?’ one of the youngest sisters asked, unwilling to admit her admiration for the heretic’s endurance. One arm lost at the elbow, both legs destroyed from the knees down, and his armour a cracked mess that leaked coolant fluids and rich, red Astartes blood.

‘It is hardly escape to crawl into a burning building,’ another laughed.

‘He wishes to die among the blasphemy he caused,’ Astaran said, her scowl even harsher in the firelight. ‘End him.’

A single gunshot rang out from the battle-line.

Zavien’s fingers stopped trembling. His reaching hand fell into the dust. His eyes, which had first opened to see the clear skies of a distant world, closed at last.

‘What should we do with the body?’ Sister Mercy Astaran asked her commander.

‘Let the echoes of this heresy remain as an example, at least until the greenskins take control of the surrounding wastelands. Come sisters, we do not have much time. Leave this wretch for the vultures.’

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THE ETERNAL CRUSADER

GUY HALEY

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CHAPTER ONE

CRUSADE'S END

At the edge of the galaxy floated an iron cathedral, an edifice of great beauty raised not to peaceful gods but to war.

For ten thousand years it had plied the stars, bringing destruction and salvation in equal measure. The enemies of mankind had long learnt to fear it, as had those it protected. War followed the ship as surely as night follows day.

It was called the *Eternal Crusader:* a vast battle-barge, the mightiest of its type ever built, ten kilometres long, whose keel was laid in the inconceivable past. The sides and forward-thrusting spine of the *Eternal Crusader* were festooned with the tools of death; its hangars were the eyries of war-angels, ever poised to open and rain the champions of mankind upon benighted worlds. So long after others of its kind had ceased to be, or had turned away from the crusade of the Emperor to stage a faltering defence against the all-consuming dark, the *Eternal Crusader* fought on for a broken dream.

Ancient, weakened by age, its corridors and chambers were empty compared to the days of its might, but its heart remained strong, its reactor pulsed hot. Still it sailed, bloody and furious, into reaches of space abandoned or forgotten, there to do battle with the alien, the heretic and the creatures of the warp, and to claim their domains as the Emperor's own.

The Black Templars, the Knights of Dorn, were the grim wardens of its precincts. Of all the sons of the primarchs, they reckoned themselves the true chosen of the Emperor. They and they alone saw through the myths and tales of their fellow Space Marines to recognise the divinity behind the man

who made them.

They held it an irony that the other Adeptus Astartes did not embrace the truth so easily seen by the inferior humans they were made to protect.

The Black Templars had never abandoned their crusade, nor ever would, not until every last alien warlord and divergent human culture was cast down, or they died in the attempt.

Steeped in blood, hardened by the failure of ancient dreams, the spirit of the *Eternal Crusader* was old and wicked in its bellicosity. Had it thoughts to form, it would not have cared for ideals of honour or of worship, only that there was a war to fight, and that it would be at the forefront of that war. How its masters would feel at this ambivalence, none would ever know. Ships have no voices, and if the Black Templars had an inkling of the nature of the ship's spirit, they would not have told. The Adeptus Astartes are jealous of their secrets.

Let it be known then that the aims and choleric nature of the Black Templars accorded well with the tempers of the *Eternal Crusader*'s angry soul. They were the same after all: weapons forged for a war that had been lost one hundred centuries ago, both cankered by time, both nevertheless dogged. That is enough.

In orbit about a poisonous world bathed in the light of sinister stars at the edge of the reach of the Astronomican, the *Eternal Crusader* bridled. Every part of its immense superstructure creaked with suppressed tension. In its primal, inchoate way it yearned to break free of the shackles of gravity and strike out onwards, ever onwards, on, on, on!

It could not. Its spirit was mighty in its way, but it had no will, no agency of action.

Within his chilly bower, the lord of the ship's masters brooded on a war he could not claim to have won, and so the *Eternal Crusader* was forced to wait.

Restlessly, it bided its time.

The Ghoul Stars Crusade was over.

From his personal sanctum aboard the *Eternal Crusader*, Helbrecht, High Marshal of the Black Templars, watched the bombing of the last world of the cythor fiends.

He stood in an armourglass cupola extending from traceried galleries.

Glass glinted to his left and right in precise geometric procession. By cunning artifice, the heroes of his Chapter had been captured in the windows, forever to raise siliceous weapons against the eternal night. The effect within was gloomy, as starlight was dimmed from the glass – the shadows of the Galleria Astra behind were deep.

The cupola, though, was clear, intended for unobstructed viewing. The ribbed shutters that protected it in battle were withdrawn into the metal supports like the lids of some monstrous compound eye.

An arming servitor and three honoured neophytes removed the Chapter Master's armour. The cupola was silent but for Helbrecht's breathing and the whir of power tools, swift, soft footsteps behind him, the muted click of his brazen war-plate being replaced in its recess on the far side of the gallery, and the distant, constant rumbling of the vessel's ordnance ravaging the unkillable planet.

The world had no name the Imperium knew of, but for Helbrecht it was 9836-18, the eighteenth planet subjugated in the 9836th Black Templar Crusade. They had dubbed it with the code-signum 'Grave Core'. Neither name would outlast its attempted destruction.

A strange, blue world of gelid and toxic atmospheres – a mid-range gas giant as sour as Sol's Neptune. No use to humanity at all, unfit for habitation. Too far from any human world to justify harvesting the useful elements of its dense air; too far, even, from any other of the galaxy's vile races for them to make use of it. Helbrecht would have been justified in leaving it.

He refused to do this.

Helbrecht hated Grave Core with the fury of the zealot. He hated it because it was a world of the bizarre cythor. But mostly he hated it because it had been empty, a tomb abandoned before the Black Templars had come to pass the Emperor's judgement upon its abhorrent inhabitants, seemingly desolate for thousands of years when that could not possibly be the case. This was where the cythor had fled – the Black Templars augurs had been clear. This was to have been the xenos' last stand. Instead of glorious victory, the Black Templars had descended to the platforms anchored in the clouds to find… nothing.

Helbrecht's slablike muscles tensed. One of his attendants flinched, interrupting the smoothness of his ministrations.

Cheated of his prey, Helbrecht had ordered Grave Core destroyed. The world was as unnatural as the fiends, and deserved to burn. But it would not die. By rights, the atmosphere should have ignited under the punishment of the orbital bombardment. Modified fusion bombs slammed down in regular patterns, silently exploding at predetermined depths in the world's thick sheath of gas. Their orange effulgence was muted; the world-fire did not take. Rather, the clouds burned reluctantly, and weirdly. Looping curls of blue skittered across the stratosphere. No more devastating than high-altitude lightning effects, these phenomena sparked strange auroras in the planet's radioactive corona. They danced, mocking Helbrecht with their vitality.

Why would it not *burn?*

No glorianas accompanied the crusade's conclusion. Melancholy ruled Helbrecht's flagship. His servants worked quietly, tugging at him as gently as they could to take away his plate. None dared address him. His cloak went, his pauldrons and heavy powerplant were borne away by the uncomplaining servitor, and his greaves and vambraces were unclasped, each carefully unscrewed from one another and unplugged from his body. With efficiency they rendered him naked. He did not want to be disrobed; he was vulnerable to his shame without his armour.

Forgive me, Emperor, for I have failed you, he thought. Strike me down now for my inadequacy.

No strike came. Helbrecht yearned to find another battle. He would have done so immediately had ritual not demanded his disarming, his prayer and his repentance.

Helbrecht moved his body with the ease of one long practised, lifting his arms or shifting his weight to aid his attendants. Otherwise he ignored them; he ignored too the sharp pains as interface spikes were withdrawn. He ignored everything but his anger and his shame. He could not hide from them.

In the windows of the cupola, reflections of his face were superimposed over the planet. A noble visage, but harsh, an unreadable stone crag weathered by the unkindnesses of the Adeptus Astartes transformation and unrelenting war. Few could gauge his thoughts from his features. Helbrecht was a guarded man.

For once, his anger was plain. It could not be seen, but it could be felt.

The last piece of his armour came away from his black carapace. The arming servitor trudged back to its station beside the armour's recess, slotted itself into its coffin in the wall and deactivated. The neophytes bowed and departed for a while, returning minutes later with hot water and warmed oils. They whispered the benedictions of cleansing as they wiped his body with damp cloths. With this done, two of the three worked warmed, scented oils into his scarred skin, massaging carefully at knotted post-human muscle. Then they scraped away the ingrained filth and war-sweat with bronze strigils. The third knelt and attended to Helbrecht's artificial right arm, a gleaming brass construct that erupted from the scarred stump of his elbow. The novitiate oiled and polished it, murmuring simple maintenance cantrips. Helbrecht ignored them and glared at the planet.

His doors chimed. The limbless servitor torso built into an alcove beside them announced his visitor, its beautiful voice at odds with the fleshless hideousness of its altered skull.

'Master of Sanctity Theoderic requests ingress. Allowed, denied?'

Helbrecht stirred, turning from the planet for the first time. His attendants skilfully accommodated themselves to his movements.

'Is he alone?' he asked.

'Negative. Master of Sanctity Theoderic is accompanied by Captain Naroosh of the Death Spectres Adeptus Astartes Chapter.'

'Leave me and return to your knights.' He dismissed his attendants. Helbrecht's voice was deep, made gruff and resonant by centuries of yelled orders and screamed prayer. As his face was emotionless, so too was his voice: bland almost beneath its roughness.

The neophytes bowed. 'As you wish, High Marshal,' they said, and departed through a lesser entrance. Four Chapter-serfs, robes embroidered with the Templars cross and armed with pistol and sword, filed in as the young Space Marines filed out. They took their stations, ready to serve this most exalted son of Rogal Dorn.

'Permit their entry,' said Helbrecht. 'Bid them welcome.' He strode with sudden purpose from the cupola. His quarters were large, encompassing the Galleria Astra in which he currently stood, a private audience chamber, the Strategium Occultis, the High Marshal's Librarius, his sleeping cell, armorium, armoury and other, more esoteric rooms. Situated at the peak of the *Eternal Crusader*'s central tower, many of the High Marshal's chambers

were capped by vaulted, armourglass ceilings that revealed the terrifying majesty of space.

These rooms had once belonged to Sigismund, founder of their order, and had almost certainly played host to Rogal Dorn himself. Such storied history, such *honour*, meant little to Helbrecht at that moment. He shrank from it, feeling unworthy.

The doors clanked back on giant cogs into the *Eternal Crusader*'s internal bulkheads. Master of Sanctity Theoderic walked into Helbrecht's rooms. As tradition demanded, the Chaplain wore his battleplate and helmet. Captain Naroosh of the Death Spectres followed. He too wore his full armour.

'My lord,' said Theoderic. He waited until the doors were shut and removed his skull helm, exposing a face that was timeless in the Adeptus Astartes way, free of the signs of genes unwinding with age, but unmistakeably ancient. Leathery and hard, it was a face that was inexpressive because it had had time to try every permutation of expression and found them all inadequate. The single stripe of hair running down his skull was brilliant white. Five service studs were screwed into his forehead in the shape of a cross – two hundred and fifty years of service.

The serfs averted their eyes. Only the marshals, the Inner Circle knights and the others of the Chaplain brotherhood were permitted to look upon the unshielded face of a Black Templar warrior-priest.

Helbrecht's face became stonier still that Theoderic should unmask before an outsider, but he did not voice his disapproval. Naroosh was a captain of a Chapter after all, albeit a foreign one, and worthy of the honour. The truth was that Helbrecht's reaction was a personal one, and to comment on what he regarded as Theoderic's lapse would be discourteous to his guest, unwelcome as he was.

Helbrecht picked up a towel offered by one of his body-serfs and wiped his face and chest with it. Another brought him his robes – many-layered priestly garb in bone-white. Over that went a thick, black woollen habit, embroidered with the fluted cross of their order. So dressed, he had the look of a great man grown weary and gone into a monastery. If, that is, one did not look into his eyes. These were dark, and burned with a warrior's zeal, flashing with the light of gunfire remembered and anticipated. He exulted in battle and sang his praises to the Emperor hardest over the ringing of blades. There was a hunger for war around him that could be tasted on the

air. Righteousness, certainty and, in his few unguarded moments, impatience for bloodshed could be glimpsed in his eyes, if one had the will to hold that gaze long enough.

His defeat had not dimmed the light in them at all. Far from it.

‘Brothers, what may I do for you?’ Helbrecht reached for a carafe, waving away the thrall that moved to pour it for him. He filled three fine pewter and glass goblets, their panelled sides as intricate as the windows, with thick blue Holschtian life-water and held one out to Theoderic. The older man placed his helmet on a table and walked forwards to accept it. Captain Naroosh stood aside. He did not remove his helmet. Not one of the Death Spectres had ever done so in any Black Templar’s presence. Helbrecht held out a second goblet to him for a moment, and replaced it upon the table without a word when the captain did not move to take it.

Theoderic perceived Helbrecht’s dourness and made his point quickly. ‘My liege, we should discuss plans for the victory ceremony,’ he said.

Helbrecht sipped lightly, a delicate gesture for so solid a man. ‘What ceremony? What victory? We do not celebrate.’

‘My liege…’

‘*We do not celebrate,*’ he said harshly. ‘My inaugural crusade as High Marshal has proved an abject failure. There is nothing to celebrate.’

‘Is that so, brother?’ said Theoderic. He used the mild tone the Chaplains employed when confronting a brother with doubts – kindly yet firm, it begged confession.

‘The world was empty. The fiends remain undefeated,’ explained Helbrecht, irritated he had to explain at all.

The Death Spectre spoke.

‘All has played out as we said it would, High Marshal.’ Naroosh’s voice was leaden, rasping through his vox-grille. Sorrow and regret could be the only emotions conveyed by such a voice. ‘There is no victory to be had over the cythor fiends. We can only watch and contain them, as has been my Chapter’s burden for millennia. You have committed your bold warriors to a fool’s errand.’

Helbrecht’s eyes flashed dangerously.

Theoderic spoke before Helbrecht could respond, holding up a hand in a silent plea for reason. ‘Perhaps you are both correct. Perhaps this empty world is a failure of sorts. Looked at another way, the High Marshal has

won a great victory. Seventeen worlds scoured. No evidence of the ghouls remains anywhere in this segmentum. They will trouble no one again. Brother, they will have to rename the Ghoul Stars, thanks to you.'

'I do not think so,' said Helbrecht. 'Captain Naroosh does not think so either. Do you, captain?'

'We warned you,' said Naroosh dolorously. 'You were vainglorious to attempt the impossible. Your efforts have come to nought. All is as we warned.'

Helbrecht turned away from the captain. The Death Spectres were the guardians of this benighted stretch of space, posted beyond the bounds of the Imperium to ensure the inhabitants of the Ghoul Stars could never escape to threaten the wider galaxy. Helbrecht had thought them indolent, cowardly even, in that they obeyed their orders of containment and did not attempt to purge the aliens. He acquiesced to their demand that he take one of their ships along with him under great sufferance, and only after the production of Inquisitorial fiat.

'Maybe, captain, if you had fought alongside us, the result would have been different.'

'It would not,' said the captain firmly. 'We did not fight, because it was pointless to fight. This we said, and this you have discovered for yourselves. Our task is to watch. We are gaolers, not conquerors. Leave these worlds. They tolerate no masters but the fiends.'

Helbrecht's eyes narrowed. 'The crusade never ends. It should never end until every star in this galaxy shines under the benevolent rule of our lord Emperor. You betray our lord's most cherished aims.'

Naroosh, who had not moved at all during their exchange, nor exhibited any sign of life beyond his speech and the tinny, near-silent thrum of his armour, pointed out of the windows. 'This place is not for us. This place is not for any creature. We know, because we once tried what you have tried. We failed – we heard their taunts, as no doubt you have also. We lament our failure to this day.' His black lenses looked deep into Helbrecht's smouldering eyes. 'You will leave this place, they will come crawling back through the gaps in the night, and nothing will have changed. You cannot sterilise their world. You cannot kill that which has never lived. They are beyond our arts of war. They can only be hindered, never subdued. Our shame you have willingly chosen to share. We are sorry that you decided to

accept this burden. We are sorry that you did not listen.’

Theoderic and Helbrecht followed the Death Spectre’s pointing finger. The cythor home world had finally caught fire, burning a sickly green. The bombardment continued.

‘You cannot be sure of that, captain. Their dead burn in pyres the breadth of this sector, their world is finally ablaze,’ said Theoderic. ‘They have gone.’

‘Gone is not a synonym for destroyed, Chaplain,’ said Naroosh. ‘They will return, as they always have.’

‘He is right, Master of Sanctity.’ Helbrecht impulsively drained his cup, but one of his serfs refilled it instantly. A sudden thirst had gripped him.

Theoderic chose his next words carefully. ‘If your mood has been blackened by what you witnessed on the platforms, the sons of Terra can put no store in the words of…’

‘I do not wish to talk of it,’ said Helbrecht, and his tone brooked no disagreement. His fury became momentarily obvious on his face, his teeth clenched. ‘No, Chaplain, this crusade is a failure. We have not won. I will not celebrate.’

Theoderic dipped his head, letting the matter rest.

‘We will depart now,’ said Naroosh. ‘We return to our brothers and the Citadel of the Unsleeping Watch. We thank you that our task will be easier for a while, my lord.’ His thanks might have been sincere or they might have been outright derision, but Naroosh’s tone did not vary. There was no clue as to his intention. ‘We wish you all fortune in your next venture. May it bring you more honour.’

Naroosh made the aquila over his chest and bowed his head in salute.

Helbrecht placed his wine aside and made the Templars cross with his forearms. Theoderic did the same.

‘Then you have my permission to leave,’ said Helbrecht, with as much civility as he could manage.

‘The Emperor guide and protect you, captain,’ said Theoderic.

‘We are a long way from the Emperor’s light here, Chaplain,’ said Naroosh. ‘A very long way.’

Naroosh walked from the room, showing a heraldry as sombre as his voice upon his left pauldron as he turned away – a grim skull with crossed scythes.

Helbrecht stared at the closed door for a full half minute after Naroosh had gone, rolling his goblet back and forth in his hand.

Theoderic cleared his throat.

‘Other matters await you, High Marshal. Have you given any thought to the matter of Mordred the Avenger’s replacement? We wish to inter his remains within the Sepulcrum Ultimus. His soul deserves rest – he was a good man, and a bold warrior.’

‘No doubt you have ideas of your own as to who should be the next Reclusiarch,’ said Helbrecht.

‘Not at all, brother,’ said Theoderic, careful not to rise to Helbrecht’s insinuation. ‘The choice is yours and yours alone. You are the High Marshal of the Black Templars – the divine will of the Emperor works through you, not I. I will not make any suggestion as to who you should elevate. You will have my opinion in the Inner Circle as ritual demands, not before.’

‘Should it be you, perhaps, Theoderic?’

‘If that is the Emperor’s will, so be it. If not, then that is also the Emperor’s will.’ He paused. ‘You are in poor humour today, my liege. I will leave you, and prepare the Ceremony of Crusade’s End. A shriving is also called for. Victory or defeat, after facing such an unclean foe, every brother’s soul requires cleansing. A shining blade is of no use if the spirit wielding it is corrupted. May our next war be more to your liking. Praise be.’

‘Praise be,’ said Helbrecht under his breath.

Theoderic reached for his helmet. It had sat there on the table, a great death’s head grinning at Helbrecht. For an insane moment, he felt it was the Emperor’s own corpselike visage, staring in disapproval.

Helbrecht sighed, some of the tension passing out of him with the breath. His voice came close to betraying his anguish, but he was his heart’s master, and would not allow his emotions to be known. ‘Brother!’ he called. ‘I am sorry. You are correct. I allow my disappointment to rule my head. This is my first crusade as High Marshal, and I cannot in all good conscience enter it as completed into the record.’

‘I understand, my brother.’

‘And I have considered the matter of Mordred’s successor,’ Helbrecht went on. ‘I am not yet decided, but I am minded to honour Mordred’s wishes.’

‘Grimaldus,’ said Theoderic. ‘Mordred knew his vocation. It is a worthy

nomination. The Avenger has been preparing him for the best part of two centuries.’

‘There are those who do not believe Grimaldus to be ready to take on the mantle of Reclusiarch,’ said Helbrecht.

‘I know, brother.’

‘Nevertheless,’ went on the High Marshal, ‘it is towards Grimaldus that I lean. I will reveal my decision to the Inner Circle once I am certain. First we must do penance for our failure, and cast off our shame. Say nothing to the others.’

Theoderic favoured his lord with an understanding look, and dipped his head. ‘As you command, my liege.’ He replaced his helm, and left Helbrecht alone with his servants.

Helbrecht turned to watch the world roasting in the breath of its own winds. The issue of Grimaldus slipped easily from his mind, and his thoughts returned to what the Death Spectres grim Chapter Master had warned him of several months before, and what he had witnessed there below in the ghouls’ nests of spun glass and acid-etched palladium. A million ossified corpses, calmly staring. And that voice…

His impassive face twitched, his hand tightening on the goblet. With a sudden, explosive cry of rage, he hurled it at the wall. His serfs rushed to clear the mess as he stalked from the room.

He went deep into his sanctuary, coming quickly to the Strategium Occultis, where only he might go, a huge, spherical space at the centre of the spire. He walked up steps cantilevered out over the room’s depths to a lectern. He activated it, sending it whirring on tracks around the room. At the base of the pit, a vast holo projector sprang into life, painting a galaxy on the air big enough to lose oneself in. Upon it were described billions of stars: a million human systems and countless others unknown, unvisited, lost or infested by xenos breeds. A hundred thousand wars were picked out in bloody red. Gothic crosses denoted the positions of the other Black Templars crusades. Taking in the endless assaults upon his beloved lord’s domains, his resolve steadied. His gaze travelled to where his knights sought to expand the rule of man. Only he was privy to that information, no one else. Only he had been chosen by the Emperor. If he must know defeat, so be it. A test, nothing more. Let him go on to the next test and pass that.

He stood there a long while, staring into the false galaxy of light, seeking a

worthy victory to wash away the sickly taste of failure.

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CHAPTER TWO

PENITENCE

The adamantium doors of the Temple of Dorn creaked open, and Helbrecht entered. From the vast crossing of the third transept, three hundred and seventy-six ash-smeared faces watched his approach, their eyes catching the light of the wide iron fire bowl at their centre. The warriors of the Ghoul Stars Crusade were broken into three roughly equal fighting companies, their officers at the front, watched over by several war-priests in full armour. Aside from the Chaplains, the brethren wore the rough robes of penitents. Helbrecht had donned his brazen battleplate again. Newly polished, it reflected a shattered galaxy of candlelight, although his face too was stained with the ash of shame. Behind him came the Inner Circle of the Ghoul Stars Crusade – Champion Bayard, Master of Sanctity Theoderic, Master of the Forge Jurisian, Castellan Ceonulf, and Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein – the warrior selected by that august brotherhood to be their senior.

Three banner bearers brought up the rear. The signifer primus bore Helbrecht's personal standard, a knight in red holding up the lantern broadcasting the Emperor's light. The signifer secundus carried the icon-heavy pole the crusade took into battle. The signifer tertio had the banner of the Ghoul Stars Crusade. This depicted a whirling vortex in the sky, a bold knight, sword raised, facing the half-glimpsed horrors within.

The delegation walked down the silent ranks of their brothers. Priceless artefacts of aeons past were rough shapes in the shadowed arcades along the aisle. Between these treasures, the solemn stone faces of heroes of their order looked on with unseeing eyes of statues'. Huge though the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were, and mighty by any reckoning was their

gathering, such grandeur was in the temple that their numbers seemed insignificant. It was a space made for ten times three hundred. The empty floor stretched into blackness around the group, a reminder of greater days.

The crossing of the third transept with the nave was the very centre of the temple. Four herms depicting the Primarch Rogal Dorn at different times in his life held up the central dome. Half-glimpsed war-saints battled there, their gold and lapis lazuli stained by one hundred centuries of candle soot. At the dome's apex was a glass lantern, through whose windows cold stars shone steadily in unblinking judgement.

The procession halted before the fire bowl. Helbrecht took the banner of the Ghoul Stars Crusade from his signifer tertio. Crusade banners were not taken into battle, but created to be hung at the campaign's successful conclusion. This one would never join its fellows. Helbrecht said nothing as he gazed upon the image. There was silence, underpinned by the ever-present drone of the ship's mechanical life and the crackle of scented logs.

'I bring you here today, brothers,' said Helbrecht eventually, 'not to celebrate victory, but failure. We have scoured the stars of the cythor.'

'Praise be,' intoned the Chaplains.

'Praise be,' replied the throng.

'But we have not destroyed them. Your efforts will be well remembered, your individual deeds marked in the hall of records, your honours respected. You, Brother Cadillus, and you, Brother Fethral, and many more of you are worthy of celebration. I am not. I have failed you, my bold warriors.'

He held the standard up and ripped it free of its mountings. Brass rings pinged upon the floor. 'This banner will not hang in this temple with the others. The name of the Ghoul Stars Crusade shall be carved upon the Wall of Shame so that all will know of my error, so long as our Chapter persists.'

He balled the standard up in the fist of his artificial arm, and cast it into fire. The blaze dimmed as it was covered, then leapt up as the cloth caught fire. Helbrecht grasped the haft of the standard in both hands, bringing it down with such force over his knee that the metal was broken asunder. He cast the pieces upon the floor with a clatter. With a rasp, he drew his blade – one of the holiest blades in the Imperium, the Sword of the High Marshals, and the Sword of Sigismund, first Champion of the Emperor – forged from the broken shards of Rogal Dorn's own weapon.

'But know this, oh Knights of Dorn!' he shouted. 'I will seek you out a

new war, so that your arms will always be weary from blade work, and my dishonour shall be washed away with the blood of the xenos, the traitor and the heretic! This I swear!'

'Praise be! Praise be! Praise be!' shouted the throng, and the temple shook. The dusty banners depending from the roof stirred in the drafts of their exultation.

The Chaplains went among the brothers then. The Black Templars knelt before their priests and were granted benediction. Skull helms leaned in close to hear of sins and failings, to forgive or to admonish, before wiping the stain of ashes away. 'You are blessed!' the Chaplains said to each. 'You are the beloved of the Emperor! Away with shame, and to a new war!'

Theoderic stepped forwards as they went about their holy business, his voice ringing out from his death's head in prayer.

'Oh Emperor! We pray for your forgiveness! Bring us a new task, so that we might expunge the sin of failure! Keep us pure in our purpose! Keep us noble in our aim!' Servitors appeared from the gloom, swinging censer arms. Cyber-cherubim swooped low, brushing the heads of the adepts with the holy scrolls they bore. Their confessional accomplished, the Black Templars broke into song.

So loud was the hymn of the Templars as they purged themselves of their shame that at first none heard the second opening of the great doors, nor the intrusion of a different tune. Pure and high, it infiltrated and complemented the harsh, basso-profundo hymn of the transhuman warriors. Beginning softly, so softly that even enhanced Adeptus Astartes senses could not hear it, it rose until it was unmissable. Helbrecht sought its source. Finding it, he fell to his knees.

Making her way down the long aisle from the great portal of Dorn came Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper, Astropath Prime of the Ghoul Stars Crusade. A hundred thralls attended her: a dozen at the fore of her procession sweeping the spotless floor with sanctified brooms, lest her purity be compromised. Five rows of cybernetic castrati followed them, singing the song of annunciation. Beyond these came books containing the names of every member of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica ever assigned to the Black Templars and the collected interpretations of their messages. The books were chained to rings sunk into the flesh of bearers whose mouths were sealed by staples of gold. More came – men clutching heavy brass poles

topped with candles the thickness of a thigh, censer-bearers, water-bearers, factotums and body servants. Then came Dei Osper's bodyguard: twenty heavily armed Adeptus Astra Telepathica bonded warriors, each carrying double-handed swords and shields whose heraldry was divided between that of the Black Templars and their mistress's adepta.

Finally, the long train of her robes borne by fluttering vat-constructs, came the Most Holy Mistress Osper.

The Black Templars changed their song to one of lesser volume, forming a counterpoint to the choir of cyber-thralls and relinquishing dominance to the voices of the astropath's servants. As one, they turned to face her and touched their heads to the floor.

The Chaplains knelt and bowed their heads except Theoderic, who raised his crozius and shouted,'Welcome, welcome, bid welcome to Blessed Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper, touched by the Emperor! Pay obeisance, give your awe! Here is one who has seen the light of the Lord of Man!'

He too knelt then. So the Black Templars remained, softly chanting, until Osper had traversed the two hundred metres to their place of gathering. Her procession parted and halted. The songs diminished to a murmur. Her bodyguards pivoted to line the aisle, clashing their blades upon their shields, and knelt, allowing Osper to come forward to greet the High Marshal.

The hymns quietened to a drone.

'Blessed Lady, to what do we owe this honour?' asked Helbrecht. 'Too infrequently do you bring the light of the Emperor to us. We thank you for the blessing of your presence.'

Osper's staff clicked on the stone floor. The buzz and murmuring of her attendants was pervasive to Helbrecht's enhanced ears – encouragements and blandishments in the main. Waves of annoyance emanated from the powerful psyker at their fussing.

'Greetings, High Marshal. I am sorry to intrude here, in your order's most holiest place. I beg your apology.'

Helbrecht looked up into the blind face of the astropath. She was a handsome woman of middling years, arresting in the strength of her features. When she had her hood down, one could see that her wavy brown hair was streaked with iron grey. Tonight she came on business of the greatest solemnity, and wore the full robes of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

Her eye sockets were covered by taut and seamless skin. When she turned her head just so, they became shallow pits of shadow.

'I have a message, one of some import. It has been shouted across the heavens at great volume, repeatedly, and with urgency from many quarters. This is why I come to disturb your prayers. Forgive me,' she asked again.

She paused, her sightless face scanning back and forth over the assembled brethren, her cheeks whispering against her green adept's hood.

'The orks have returned to Armageddon. A plea for aid has been sent across the Imperium, so far and so loud that I received it even here.'

Helbrecht looked upwards. His expressionless face could not display the ecstasy he felt. 'Emperor! Oh, Emperor! I thank you for this most welcome sign! A chance, a chance to wash away failure in the blood of our enemies!'

He stood, and held Sigismund's sacred sword high. 'I take a solemn oath before all my brothers here present, and the most holy Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper!' He turned around to face his men. A wall of prayer emanated from their modified throats, so low it made Osper's teeth vibrate. 'Oh Emperor! I swear in the fullness of your sight that I will not rest until Ghazghkill, the Great Beast of Armageddon, lies dead at my feet. I, Helbrecht of the Black Templars, the most faithful of all the sons of your sons, will slay him.' He knelt suddenly, reversing his blade and planting its point on the deck. Under the barest pressure, it slid into the stone. 'This oath I take before your vessel, Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper. Hear it, oh Lord, and be certain of its sincerity. Praise be!'

'Praise be!' shouted the brothers.

Serfs rushed forwards, a servitor-scribe between them. The machine-slave's chest-mounted mechanism chuntered while it walked, spilling an oath paper from its cybernetic innards. One of the serfs tore the warm parchment free, and held it to Helbrecht's lips to kiss as the other prepared the seal. With the hiss of hot metal on wax, the menials affixed the paper to Helbrecht's chestplate.

'It is sworn. It is done.' He stood. Anyanka could not see the tears drying upon his cheeks. His religious fervour retreated back within him, leaving him a man of stone again.

'The Ghoul Stars Crusade is done. By the power given me, I formally incept this Armageddon Crusade. Let our victory stand as testament to the supremacy of man. Mistress Osper, if I might request that you and your

adepts send immediate word to Marshal Amalrich and Marshal Ricard. Inform them that I declare their crusades to be over, and that they must make all haste to the Chapter keep at Fergax in the Ultima Segmentum. Inform them to hold there and await further orders.'

'It is my duty and my honour, my lord,' said the astropath.

Helbrecht's earlier dismay was forgotten. His blood was hot with zeal. 'To your stations, brothers. We make all haste to the Armageddon System!'

Something akin to pleasure coursed through the *Eternal Crusader* as its warp engines were engaged to rip aside the curtains of reality and show the horrors behind.

Flanked by its seven escorts in arrowhead formation, the *Eternal Crusader* leapt into the jagged tear in the walls of space-time. Their inferior engines struggling to keep pace, the heavy cruiser *Majesty* and lesser battle-barge *Night's Vigil* straggled after. For the briefest instant, the rip in the cosmos afforded a view into a realm of insanity where the engine stacks of the crusade fleet burned, candles in a hurricane.

A boom rumbled across the void, sound where no sound should be, as it collapsed. The Black Templars were gone, their ships carrying them forwards on their endless crusade.

Some hours after the fleet's departure, the guttering embers of Grave Core went out. With remarkable swiftness, the frigid blue of the planet's original colour began to return.

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CHAPTER THREE

GRIMALDUS

The ship juddered, bouncing over a wave in the deep warp.

The seven knights of the Inner Circle ignored the *Eternal Crusader*'s creaking and rolling. Gathered in the Chamber of Sigismund were Champion Bayard, Master of Sanctity Theoderic, Master of the Forge Jurisian, Castellan Ceonulf, Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein and Brother-Dreadnought *Cantus Maxim Gloria*. Also present were Abbott Giscard, leader of the thrall-monks of the Monasterium Certituda deep in the bowels of the ship, Sergeant Majoris Valdric, chief officer of the Chapter's warrior-serfs, and Confessor Cornelius Halquon, lately arrived from the convent world of Rith. These last three had no vote in the doings of the council, but their voices were heeded by Helbrecht, the confessor's especially.

Helbrecht occupied his throne. In front of it was a pool of dazzling light.

Sword Brethren in robes lined the walls in the shadows, allowed to witness but not permitted to add their own arguments. The air was thick and hot, heavy with the scent of incense and the Dreadnought's exhaust stacks. The rumble of *Cantus'*s powerplant turning over brought an industrial quality to the proceedings. The confessor, new to the ways of the Adeptus Astartes, was taken aback when *Cantus* clanged into the room to take up his place at the edge of the Inner Circle. It was explained that *Cantus* was an Ancient, and senior Dreadnought of the Black Templars. His wisdom was invaluable in such debates as these.

Currently, Valdric occupied the speaking place in the circle of light.

'Lord Grimaldus is a good choice, my liege,' said Valdric. He was a stern, grim man, who had aged quickly in the manner of unaltered humans, bald,

gruff and close-mouthed. In his gleaming armour and with sword by his side, some saw in him a Helbrecht in miniature.

‘He has little time for the menials, lord,’ said the abbott.

‘And rightwise too!’ barked Valdric. Spittle was apt to fly from his mouth when he shouted. His grey moustache quivered. The two men had little time for each other, despite their equal love for their masters. ‘The spiritual welfare of the Chapter’s servants is your concern, not the Lord Reclusiarch’s. A warrior-priest should be grim, unapproachable. He frightens the sergeants, and that is as it should be.’

‘Have you finished?’ growled Bayard.

Helbrecht sat forwards on the great throne of Sigismund, his face emerging from the shadows cast by its ornate gothic canopy of carved black wood. Above him, tiny, stylised figures of Black Templars waged endless, frozen wars against grotesque foes.

‘Valdric has the right to speak, Bayard,’ said Helbrecht.

‘My liege–’

‘Now is not your turn to speak, Champion. We know of your objections. Confessor, holy father, give me your opinion.’

Halquon, a shrewd man with a sharp face, came forwards. He was young, but a twisted spine caused him to go about perpetually hunched and clutching at his staff, as if he were burdened with the weight of his office.

‘The Ecclesiarchy recognises Chaplain Mordred’s wishes. You will find no objection from our diocese. I cannot speak for all, but the episcopal rede of Ultima Segmentum has voted in Grimaldus’s favour.’

‘What has the rede to do with our affairs?’ asked Bayard. He was particularly short-tempered, and his lack of respect offended some of the others.

‘Among the Adeptus Astartes, you are the sole followers of the great truth of the Imperium, my lord,’ said Halquon to Bayard. ‘That the Emperor is a god. Your spiritual decisions are of great interest to us.’

Helbrecht’s robes rustled as he raised his hand.

‘Brothers, what say the rest of you? Most venerable *Cantus*?’

‘Grim-ald-us,’ rumbled the Dreadnought, and fell silent.

‘Castellan?’

‘Grimaldus.’

‘Praeses-Sword Brother?’

Gulvein stepped down into the light, his face thoughtful. ‘I do not agree, my liege,’ said Gulvein. ‘Grimaldus has all the makings of a great and noble warrior – he has since the day he was elevated to our Chapter from the gross condition of humanity. But he is not ready yet.’

‘Your objection is noted, Praeses. You, forgemaster, what is your opinion?’

Jurisian stepped forwards into the light; his red robes, embroidered with the Machina Opus and the Templars cross, stirred up a storm of glinting dust motes.

‘He is not ready,’ Jurisian said regretfully. ‘He is a master of small engagements, and a warrior without peer. But he is not a leader of the Chapter.’

‘The forgemaster speaks the truth, High Marshal,’ said Bayard. He too stepped down from Helbrecht’s side and joined Gulvein and Jurisian. ‘Grimaldus is flawed by hesitation, a second’s delay in all he does, and it is no secret why. He holds himself to his master’s standards. Doubt clings to him, darkening his place in the Chapter.’

‘He is shaken by Mordred’s death. He seeks his place in the Eternal Crusade,’ continued Jurisian.

Helbrecht put his flesh hand to his mouth in thought. He rubbed his lips and he shook his head. ‘In the coming war, I will give him the chance to find that place.’

Jurisian and Gulvein bowed, and retreated to their places. Bayard did not relent.

‘My liege! I must protest – Grimaldus is not the right choice! What of - Theoderic? He is older and wiser by far. Or Cethervold of Ricard’s crusade?’

The Sword Brethren jeered, and clashed their hands on their ritual shields.

‘Hold your peace, brothers!’ said Helbrecht. ‘The Inner Circle have cast their votes – I have heard the words of our most trusted servants, and that of the Ecclesiarchy’s emissary. All have spoken, and I have heard. My judgement in this matter that I believe Mordred’s wishes are paramount. Who can dispute that he was not as fine a judge of men as he was a warrior?’

The High Marshal looked from face to face. None disagreed.

‘Then it is done. Grimaldus will be the next Reclusiarch of the Black Templars.’

‘Now,’ said Theoderic. A group of serfs came forwards carrying large bronze bowls. ‘We will undergo physical and spiritual purging, and then we shall feast.’

The following day, Bayard travelled to the Temple of Dorn. Silent monks, their faces hidden, whispered away from him as he walked through its empty immensity.

A knot of shame clogged his throat. He went to the chapels at the first transept’s end side, those set aside for private prayer and confession. As he approached a shriving chamber, he startled a vat creature out of its roost. His hand went automatically for his bolt pistol, and he cursed himself for his nerves. The thing flapped away, moronically croaking praises to the Emperor.

A servitor-warden asked his business. Bayard spoke it freely; there was no shame in seeking guidance. He was shown into a bare cell. He waited but a short while in silent contemplation before he heard the steady whir of active power armour and heavy boots on the mosaic floor.

Bayard looked up to see the Master of Sanctity. Theoderic’s voice growled through the vox-grille of his skull helm. In the half light, he appeared as a revenant come to test the damned. ‘You wish to confess, my brother. Speak your sins and I will soothe your suffering.’

Bayard returned his gaze to the floor. ‘Intercede for me, most holy brother, with the Emperor. I have committed the sin of speaking out against my liege.’

‘It is no sin to voice your objections in council, my brother. While you carry the black sword, you are a member of the Inner Circle. It is your right to speak, and to be heard.’

‘It is a sin to continue one’s objection when your voice has already been heard.’

‘It is,’ agreed Theoderic. ‘Best that you admit so, and move on. A day’s prayer will banish your troubles.’

‘That is not the worst of it, Brother-Chaplain. I have not set aside my doubts. They writhe within me still like serpents. They sink their fangs into my soul.’ He looked up hesitantly. ‘It should have been you.’

Theoderic sighed, and walked round to Bayard’s front. His tone became gentler, but clad in his armour he presented a fearsome sight. ‘No, it should

not, my brother. The Emperor's will is the Emperor's will. The High Marshal has the Emperor's blessing, he was chosen by the Emperor, and so the High Marshal's word is the Emperor's word. Divinity works through Helbrecht and him alone. Would you take it upon yourself to make the Emperor's choices for him?'

'No, of course not.'

'And it is not for I or for you to make the High Marshal's decisions for him either, Bayard.'

Bayard shifted, adjusting the great blade girt to his waist. In his armour or out of it, the black sword was never far from his side. 'I was chosen by the Emperor too. I have seen him, Brother-Chaplain. I have seen him in my dreams! Can Helbrecht say the same? I say Grimaldus is weak, too unsure of himself. He is no Mordred.'

Theoderic rounded on him, his voice rumbling sternly from his mask. 'The Emperor chose you for a different task, Champion. Do not mistake one role for another. Mordred has been preparing Grimaldus as his successor for nearly two hundred years.'

'Then Mordred was wrong.'

Theoderic raised his hand, fingers spread, as if to lay his gauntlet upon the top of Bayard's head. He hesitated, and pointed accusingly instead. 'You are too proud.'

The ghost of a sneer poisoned Bayard's hawkish features. 'You admonish me for pride? I have heard from your own lips that we should be proud, for we are the sole bearers of the light. What of Helbrecht, is he not proud?'

'We should be proud. Helbrecht is right to be proud. He fulfils his role. The artificer in the forge who maintains your armour, the basest menial who washes your clothes – they too are right to be proud as they also fulfil their roles. Your pride is misplaced because you have yet to do the same. When your corpse lies in the Sepulcrum Ultimus, covered in glory, you may partake of as much pride as you wish. We each have our own roles to perform, Bayard. We do not question what the Emperor has chosen for us. Arrogance is not pride. Do you understand?'

Bayard stared back.

'Do you understand?' said Theoderic, this time at a greater volume.

Bayard's face contorted. His natural pride and deep misgivings warred with his desire to comply with Helbrecht's ruling. 'Yes… Yes, Chaplain. I

do.’

‘You do not think Grimaldus is worthy still?’

Bayard cleared his throat. ‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘No, I don’t.’

Then Theoderic did put his hand upon Bayard’s head. ‘To doubt is not to err, Champion Bayard. Without doubt, there can be no certainty, and with no certainty there is no truth. But when our doubts cannot be overcome or reconciled with the wishes of others, you must learn to discard them.’

He pressed down hard on the Champion’s head. ‘In the name of the Emperor, lord of all mankind and giver of the light, I absolve you of your sins, Champion Bayard. Go now in peace.’

This has to be right. This is right, thought Helbrecht. It is right because I cannot be wrong. Why then, oh Emperor, do I still feel irresolute?

Helbrecht wore his bone-coloured robes, and waited before the Tomb of Sigismund. The founder of their Chapter was entombed in a sarcophagus of glistening white marble, his prone, heroic form rendered three times life size. Sigismund’s monument dwarfed Helbrecht, as much as his legacy dwarfed every High Marshal who came after him.

Is this right? He asked himself. Yes. Yes.

For the first time since his defeat by the blasphemous xenos construct Trazyn, Helbrecht was uncertain. The failure of the crusade upset him. Others still spoke of it as a victory, but he could not, would not see it as such. His shoulders stung from the ritual scourgings he had undertaken nightly since they entered the warp. Not so much from the physical pain, this was frustratingly fleeting, but from the acid shame of his oath unfulfilled.

He put his anger from his mind. There was this matter to resolve, the elevation of Grimaldus – he must focus on that alone.

This is right, he insisted to himself. It cannot be any other way.

He went over the objections of the others, his own thoughts. He weighed everything meticulously in making his judgements. In this equation, it was the lack of total certitude that he found vexing.

Grimaldus and he were kindred spirits. But Bayard was correct that Grimaldus pondered too long before acting. This elevation would be difficult on Grimaldus, for all Mordred’s long preparation.

He will emerge from it tempered, his edge honed, thought Helbrecht.

Difficulty forges better weapons for the Emperor than ease.

Grimaldus approached, wearing his Chaplain's armour and battle-robes. He bore no crozius, and wore no helm. In Helbrecht's hands was Mordred's helmet. Once bestowed upon Grimaldus, it would become his new face. To the brothers of the Chapter, it would be as if Mordred had never died.

Grimaldus approached and knelt at Helbrecht's feet in the centre of the knights of the Inner Circle.

'Grimaldus,' said Helbrecht. His voice rang from the temple's vaulting.

'Yes, my liege.'

Helbrecht looked down at the Chaplain. His obeisance was perfect in humility. It was impossible to judge how Grimaldus felt about this appointment from his comportment.

'We have brought you here to honour you, just as you have honoured us for so many years,' said Helbrecht. 'We have summoned you to be judged.'

Grimaldus gave the ritual response. 'I have answered the summons. I submit myself before your judgement.'

'Mordred is dead, slain by the Archenemy. You, Grimaldus, have lost a master. We have all of us lost a brother.'

The knights intoned their liege's words, the repetition chasing echoes of Helbrecht's utterance into the shadows.

Silence.

'We mourn his loss, but honour his wisdom in this, his final order. Grimaldus, warrior-priest of the Eternal Crusade, it was the belief of the Reclusiarch Mordred that upon his death, you would be the worthiest of our brother Chaplains to stand in his stead. His final decree before the returning of his gene-seed to the Chapter was that you, of all of your brethren, would be the one to rise to the rank of Reclusiarch.'

Grimaldus raised his head, staring into the dead, glaring eyes of Mordred's war mask. There was nothing but determination on Grimaldus's face.

'Grimaldus, you are a veteran in your own right, and once stood as the youngest Sword Brother in the history of the Black Templars. As a Chaplain, your life has been without cowardice or shame, your ferocity and faith without equal. It is my belief, not merely the wish of your fallen master, that you should take the honour we offer you now.'

Grimaldus nodded, a barely perceptible movement.

'Rise, if you would refuse this honour. Rise and walk from this sacred

chamber, if you wish no part in the hierarchy of our most noble Chapter.’

Helbrecht’s hearts caught as he imagined Grimaldus standing, stumbling back, repulsed by the honour. He half saw it.

Nonsense, thought Helbrecht. Mordred believed him worthy. He is worthy, I am sure of it. I do not make mistakes. I cannot make mistakes. I am the chosen of the Emperor.

Grimaldus did not move.

Satisfied, Helbrecht drew the blade of Sigismund. ‘You will have your own rituals within the Chaplain brotherhood. For now, I recognise you as the inheritor to your master’s mantle,’ he said, and held the blade at Grimaldus’s throat. The Sword was ten millennia old, and as sharp as the day it was made, the balance of it was such that Helbrecht barely felt it in his hand, despite its huge size. His hearts never failed to quicken upon its drawing. ‘You have waged war at my side for two hundred years, Grimaldus. Will you stand at my side as Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade?’

Grimaldus spoke without hesitation. ‘Yes, my liege.’

Helbrecht drew back his bionic hand and punched his new Reclusiarch in the face.

‘I dub thee Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade. You are now a leader of our blessed Chapter. As a knight of the Inner Circle, let that be the last blow you receive unanswered.’

Helbrecht watched Grimaldus’s face carefully. He yearns to strike me back, he thought. This is fitting, this is right. Mordred was wise in his selection. I am not wrong to honour his wish.

‘It… will be so my lord.’

‘As it should be. Rise, Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade.’

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CHAPTER FOUR

ARMAGEDDON

The *Eternal Crusader* speared back into the mortal realm to find a system readying itself for war. Vox-traffic, squealing with star-born interference, echoed over the comms channels, bringing the rumour of battles done days past at the edge of the system, orders long since fulfilled and the screams of dying men whose corpses were hours cold. Interspersed with Imperial signals were the invaders' broadcasts, carrying the deep, inhumanly guttural utterances of orks.

There were two weeks, maybe less, until the orks made their way to Armageddon. The Black Templars fleet was swifter, cutting in from the Mandeville point to the heart of the system in a matter of days. Helbrecht remained on the command deck of the *Eternal Crusader* for most of that time, retreating only for prayer, and rarely resting. He consulted often with his shipmaster, Baloster, but allowed his serfs to attend to their duties without comment. His eyes were forever on the oculus. When not staring into the sparse voidscape of interplanetary space, he could be found at the holo tables, running the system's planetary orbits months ahead, plotting all manner of strategic situations again and again. Scribes from the Hall of Records came to him in a constant stream, bringing every scrap of information they could find on the Second War and the ork warlord who had brought Armageddon to its knees once before.

They coasted round the gravity well of Pelucidar. As they used the planet's gravitative attraction to slingshot themselves to greater speed, scattered wreckage annihilated itself on the void shields of the *Eternal Crusader* and her sisters. Fresh isotopes tickled the *Crusader*'s auspexes from recently

destroyed vessels and spent munitions. A battle had been fought there recently. They saw no other sign of the orks. For all the crowded nature of the Armageddon System, the cosmos remained big enough to swallow them all.

Finally, Armageddon itself: it grew from a glint of sickly yellow to a grey ball of poisoned skies and poisoned seas, its diseased surface scabbed by the metallic growths of human hives. Whether man could be entirely to blame for Armageddon's deadly nature was moot; its own volcanic systems blasted out a thousand years' worth of industrial pollution every year, but the actions of mankind lay heavily on the world.

And this, thought Helbrecht, surveying the grubby planet, is what we must fight for. Such is the will of the Emperor.

The activity around Armageddon was frantic, thousands of ships dropping from orbit to surface, giving no time for their ticking hulls to cool before soaring skywards again. When night's Terminator crept around the globe, the light trails of spacecraft coming to and from orbit in queues thousands of kilometres long lit up the dark. Millions of men and billions of tonnes of war materiel came down endlessly from the sky. Adeptus Mechanicus coffin ships, Astra Militarum landers, tank transports, freighters, Naval lighters, dual void/atmospheric fighter squadrons, barques, heavy lifters, resupply galleasses, tugs – every kind of vessel imaginable, stirring the skies of Armageddon into unseasonal storm through their constant activity.

All orbits were crammed with ships of war, the void between them dense with craft ferrying messengers and personnel to and fro. Traffic control worked overtime, the orbital stations of the hive world staffed by gritty-eyed adepts directing ships away from each other. Sleep became a commodity rarer and more valuable than adamantium.

The Black Templars Crusade was only one fleet among dozens. Each passing day more vessels arrived, called from every corner of the galaxy to this vital part of the Segmentum Solar. Aboard vessels, monitoring stations, ground control bunkers and command ships, scribes laboured ceaselessly over their cogitators and auto-scriveners, logic banks running hot calculating the names, numbers and disposition of the growing Imperial forces. Servitors collapsed, their brains cooked by data overload. The planetary noosphere was as clogged as the skies, and information was slow in getting to its destination. Those wisest among the members of the various

adepta responsible for all this looked to their augur screens, deep-space pict captures and far-seeing oculi and knew it would not be enough. All too soon the lumbering hulks bearing the orks would be upon them. There were three of these waste-ships, then nine, then fifteen, escorted by somewhere in the region of two thousand ork cruisers, a host many times greater than the combined Battlefleet Armageddon and Space Marine fleets.

The *Eternal Crusader* was allocated a slot in a crowded orbit. A summons came soon after. Helbrecht called his new Reclusiarch and his Champion to his side, and together they went down to the surface where, at Hades Hive, a council gathered.

A theatre auditorium in the drab city played host to the first act of war. Over one hundred commanders of the Imperium – human, post-human and cybernetically altered – stood shoulder to shoulder in a riot of differing heraldries and uniforms. In the bunchings of the group one could see cliques developing, results of shared outlook or centuries-old debts of honour.

Between some factions there was outright antagonism. Hard looks and harsh words were exchanged many times. But every man and woman there, be it on shoulder, sash or armour plate, bore the freshly minted badge of the Armageddon campaign. Unity was the guiding principle at work, unity in the face of disaster.

Helbrecht approved. Too infrequently did the subjects of the Emperor act in harmony.

To Helbrecht's front and right was Grimaldus, behind him Bayard. The two of them had exchanged no more than a handful of words since the Reclusiarch's investiture. It would be interesting to see what both of them made of this meeting. Grimaldus's first test, that is how Bayard will see it, but it shall also be a test for him, thought Helbrecht.

There was one within to whom all paid heed, a man of such years that he was truly ancient by non-Space Marine standards. Papery flesh, thin bones and a body ravaged by war. His one eye had been replaced by an unwieldy augmetic and his right arm was a stump with his commissar's uniform sleeve pinned neatly over it. He should have been at rest, this loyal servant of the Emperor; he should not have been at war. Rejuvenats and surgery only went so far in holding the corporeal shell of a man together, yet within

him burned a devotion to the Emperor that Helbrecht had rarely witnessed. To see such faith in so fragile a man humbled Helbrecht, and he could not take his eyes from him.

He was Commissar Sebastian Yarrick, the hero of the Second War for Armageddon. He looked around the room, his remaining flesh eye undimmed by age.

'Hades Hive will not survive the first week,' he said. His voice was dry but powerful. Servo-skulls broadcast his words to all corners of the crowd.

A murmur went around the room.

Yarrick leaned on the edge of the chart desk at the centre of the chamber and keyed coordinates into a numeric keypad. The current display of Hades Hive shifted focus, drawing out to show both inhabited subcontinents. Hades became a blinking signifier. The pinprick of red denoting it covered an insignificant portion of the hive on the pict-map. A metal disease with a suppurating sore at its heart, thought Helbrecht. A sure sign of humanity's dominance, that we remake worlds so readily.

'Six decades ago, the Great Beast met his defeat at Hades. Our defence here was what won us that war,' Yarrick said.

Helbrecht had read this. His opinion differed. Yarrick had won that war, and the defence of Hades Hive could not have occurred without him.

'Why?' a transhuman voice interrupted.

There were many Space Marines present. Over two dozen captains, and a handful of Chapter Masters. Such a gathering belonged to legend, to the times of the Great Crusade. Helbrecht recognised the speaker as belonging to the Angels of Fire, an insignificant Chapter. They had a reputation for brashness and arrogance, to make up, he suspected, for their patchwork heritage. They were a mere thirty centuries old, and could claim no primarch. Founded by decree with gene-seed tithed to Terra, they were a mongrel breed. You could not create nobility from nothing.

'We recognise Brother-Captain Amaras.' A herald banged the butt of his staff on the floor three times, and the skull-drones repeated his announcement. 'Commander of the Angels of Fire.'

'Why would the greenskin warlord simply annihilate the greatest battlefield of the last war?' Amaras said. 'Surely our forces should muster at Hades and stand ready to defend against the largest assault?'

Helbrecht watched this young upstart. Their armour was as offensive as his

attitude, bright scarlet chased with orange flames. Amaras did not notice Helbrecht's stare, but emboldened by words from other commanders, spoke to Yarrick through a condescending smile. 'We are the Emperor's chosen, mortal. We are His Angels of Death. We have centuries of battle experience compared to these human commanders at your side.'

A new voice barked out harshly, moderated by a vox-grille. 'No.'

The voice was Grimaldus's.

Good, thought Helbrecht. Now we shall hear your wisdom. He left his stare boring into the side of Amaras's head, but listened carefully to his Reclusiarch.

'We recognise Brother-Chaplain Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Black Templars,' shouted the herald.

From his posture, Helbrecht guessed Grimaldus was surprised he had spoken, but realised he could not take back his objection. He shifted in his armour. Go on, brother, thought Helbrecht, put this insolent unbeliever in his place.

'The xenos do not think as we do,' the Reclusiarch said. 'The greenskins do not come to Armageddon for vengeance, or to seek to bleed us for the defeats they have suffered at Imperial hands in the past. They come for the pleasure of violence.'

Yarrick watched Grimaldus keenly, his own face in the dim light as skeletal as the Chaplain's death mask.

Amaras pounded his fist on the table, and pointed at the Templar. Grimaldus tensed. Helbrecht noted a flicker of movement in his pistol hand, but he restrained himself.

'That lends credence to my belief,' said Amaras.

You fool, thought Helbrecht, he is not agreeing with you.

'Not at all,' said Grimaldus. 'Have you inspected what remains of Hades Hive? It is a ruin. There is nothing to fight over, nothing to defend. The Great Beast knows this. He will be aware that Imperial forces will put up no more than a token resistance here, and fall back to defend hives that are still worth defending. It is likely that the warlord will obliterate Hades Hive from orbit, rather than seek to take it.'

'We cannot let this hive fall! It is a symbol of mankind's defiance!' protested Amaras. 'With respect, Chaplain–'

'Enough,' Yarrick said. 'Peace, Brother-Captain Amaras. Grimaldus speaks

with wisdom.’

Grimaldus inclined his head towards the ancient hero in thanks.

‘I will not be silenced by a mortal,’ Amaras growled.

Like all puppies, thought Helbrecht, there is no real fight in him.

Yarrick stared the captain down, letting his patient glare linger on him before turning to the rest of the room. His augmetic eye whirred as it focused.

‘Hades will not survive the first week.’ He shook his head. The motion made his statement final, irrefutable. ‘We must abandon the hive and spread the forces here to other bastions of strength. This is not the Second War. What is coming in-system now far exceeds what has laid waste to the planet before. The other hives must be reinforced a thousand times over.’ He cleared his throat, a hoarse sound devoid of moisture, a cough rooted in the dry wastelands of life’s final years. ‘Hades Hive will burn. We must make our stand elsewhere.’

General Kurov, ostensibly in command of all Imperial forces on Armageddon, stepped forwards with a data-slate in hand. ‘We come to the division of command.’ He took a breath. ‘The fleet that will besiege Armageddon is too vast to repel.’

There were jeers. Helbrecht and his brothers remained silent.

‘Hear me, friends and brothers.’ Kurov sighed. ‘And hear me well. Those of you who insist that this war is anything more than a conflict of bitter attrition are deceiving yourselves. At current estimates, we have over fifty thousand Adeptus Astartes in the Armageddon subsector, and thirty times the number of Imperial Guardsmen. And it will still not be enough to secure a clean victory. At our best estimates, Battlefleet Armageddon, the orbital defences and the Adeptus Astartes fleets remaining in the void will be able to deny the enemy landing for nine days. These are our best estimates.’

‘And the worst?’ A Space Wolf asked. Helbrecht took in his furs, his totem-decked battleplate, and thought him a heathen.

‘Four days,’ the old man said through his grim smile.

Silence came that no one broke. Kurov seized the opportunity to continue without interruption. Helbrecht decided that he had more respect for Kurov and Yarrick than for many of his supposed brother Space Marines.

‘Admiral Parol of Battlefleet Armageddon has outlined his plan and uploaded it to the tactical network for all commanders to review. Once the

orbital war is lost, be it four days or nine, our fleets will break from the planet in a fighting withdrawal. From then on, Armageddon will be defenceless beyond what is already entrenched upon the surface. The orks will be free to land whatever and wherever they wish. Admiral Parol will lead the remaining Naval ships of the fleet in repeated guerrilla strikes against the invaders' vessels still in orbit.'

'Who will lead the Adeptus Astartes vessels?' Captain Amaras spoke up again.

Yarrick paused, and nodded at the Black Templars.

'Given his seniority and the expertise of his Chapter, High Marshal Helbrecht of the Black Templars will take overall command of the Adeptus Astartes fleets,' said Yarrick. The look of understanding that passed between himself and Helbrecht was not lost on some of the room's other ambitious commanders.

Uproar ensued – some Space Marine leaders demanded that the honour be theirs. The others looked on with a mixture of disbelief and distaste to see humanity's champions bickering.

'We are to remain in orbit?' Grimaldus asked.

Helbrecht ignored him. He kept his focus on Yarrick, his face as stony as always. Let no man accuse him of triumphalism in being awarded the singular honour of overall command. 'We are the obvious choice to command the Adeptus Astartes elements in the orbital battles.'

'The *Crusader* will plunge like a lance into the core of their fleet. High Marshal, we can slaughter the greenskin tyrant before he even sets foot on the world below us,' said Grimaldus, his voice fervent.

Now Helbrecht turned to Grimaldus.

'I have already spoken with the other marshals, my brother,' he said, pitching his voice low so that it was lost in the ongoing furore rippling around the room. 'We must leave a contingent on the surface. I will lead the orbital crusade. Amalrich and Ricard will lead the forces in the ash wastes. All that remains in a single crusade is to defend one of the hive cities that yet remains ungarrisoned by Adeptus Astartes.'

Grimaldus shook his head. Helbrecht wondered if he guessed what was coming. This would be hard for the Reclusiarch to bear. That is why it had to be done. 'That is not our duty, my liege. Both Amalrich and Ricard have a host of honours inscribed on their armour. Each has led greater crusades

alone. Neither will relish an exile to a filthy manufactorum hive while a thousand of their brothers wage a glorious war in the heavens. You would shame them.'

'And yet,' said Helbrecht implacably, 'a commander must remain.'

Grimaldus's reaction did not surprise Helbrecht; nevertheless, it did disappoint him.

'Don't,' said the Reclusiarch. There was a plea in the voice of the Chaplain. Disappointing. 'Don't do this.'

'It is already done.'

'No, no!'

'This is not the time.' Helbrecht made especial effort to keep his voice level. His own fury responded to Grimaldus's. The Reclusiarch's reaction was unseemly, and demanded rebuke. 'The decision is made, Grimaldus. I know you, as I knew Mordred. You will not refuse.'

'No!'

The animated debate of nearby groups faltered. Helbrecht was acutely aware of commanders staring. To see differing Chapters argue was bad enough; dissension between two officers in the same brotherhood put them on edge.

Helbrecht said nothing. He needed to end this, and had no desire to provoke Grimaldus further.

'I would burst the Great Beast's black heart in my hand, and cast his blasphemous flagship to the surface of Armageddon wreathed in holy fire. Do not leave me here, Helbrecht. Do not deny me this glory!'

'You will not refuse this honour,' repeated Helbrecht. Grimaldus relented, and took a step back. The confrontation melted away as greater concerns took hold in the crowd, but Helbrecht was still aware of his Reclusiarch's dissatisfaction.

Order was restored. Conversation turned to tactics. Grimaldus waited the barest amount of time that decorum demanded before walking away.

'Wait, brother,' said Helbrecht. He did not order, allowing Grimaldus to make his own choice. He willed the Reclusiarch to see sense, to not demean himself further.

Grimaldus left without another word.

Helbrecht watched him go, face fixed. Disappointing.

'My liege–' said Bayard.

Helbrecht cut off whatever the Champion was about to say. ‘Say nothing. Grimaldus will stay, Bayard. He will not dishonour us. He will emerge from this trial newly forged, or he will die gloriously. Either way, his actions will make this small tantrum of his appear as nothing. Now, attend to the discussion. We will speak no more of this today.’

The briefing lasted throughout the night, the final groups of generals only dispersing when Armageddon’s pallid sun pushed its rays through the choking air outside. Helbrecht and Bayard were among the last to leave, exiting the amphitheatre to an external walkway curling around a war-scarred starscraper. Already it was uncomfortably hot. Bayard and Helbrecht walked together towards the landing fields and Helbrecht’s Thunderhawk.

‘Such a man as Yarrick is a lesson to us all,’ said Helbrecht.

‘There is a light about him, brother.’

‘You can see it?’

‘Yes,’ said Bayard simply. Helbrecht did not press him on it. What the Emperor chose to reveal to his Champion was only for them to know.

They proceeded on several hundred more paces, their ceramite boots grinding the windblown ash dirtying the walkway into fine dust, both deep in solitary thought. A hundred kilometres of urban sprawl stretched away beneath them, the unrepaired damage of fifty years ago hazed by smog.

Bayard broke the silence. ‘When we landed, and we offered our services to General Kurov on the landing field, you spoke of nine hundred battle-brothers, and Amalrich and Ricard in orbit when they are not. Why?’

‘A necessary deception, brother.’

Bayard looked at the ground as they walked, idly flicking his targeting reticule from one skittering piece of grit to the next. ‘They hear the number, and it gives them hope?’ he ventured.

‘It does. But there is a more practical consideration than morale,’ said Helbrecht. ‘With nine hundred battle-brothers, we possess one of the largest Space Marine contingents in the system. With four hundred, we do not.’

‘And so another commander might think he has more legitimate claim to the admiralship of the combined Adeptus Astartes fleets.’

‘Just so,’ said Helbrecht. ‘Never forget, we are the chosen sons of the Emperor, Bayard. Of all the Adeptus Astartes, only we have ever seen fit to

acknowledge the truth of the Emperor's divinity – no Chapter but we of the Adeptus Astartes has ever done this. The others are fools to deny our lord as a god. They take no notice that our faith is rewarded, and that we are the Emperor's right hand. It is fitting and just that I take command of the assembled fleets. Let the unbelievers wail and complain. They will follow me still, because they know in their hearts that I am the best choice for overall void commander, divinely appointed or not. And I am the Emperor's elect, even if they do not care to admit it. What I told the commanders is not a falsehood. Amalrich and Ricard will be in orbit soon enough, and they shall rain down upon the orks as avenging angels. I have pledged nine hundred of our brothers to this war. Nine hundred Black Templars are what the defenders of Armageddon will receive. I keep my oaths.'

'Meanwhile, Grimaldus goes to Helsreach as our emissary.'

'Yes. And as our promise. Let none say the Black Templars stint in blood. Parol has a viable plan. We will stay to aid him in delaying the ork invasion. When the fleet enacts its fighting withdrawal, we shall examine the situation, and depart for Fergax to fetch our brothers from there when occasion allows.'

'I do not understand why you are telling me this, my liege.'

'As the Emperor's Champion, Bayard, you are a knight of the Inner Circle. You are entitled to know.'

'What does it matter if I know or not? My visions grow stronger – they have outgrown my dreams to plague my waking moments. I am to die soon. This sharing of knowledge does neither of us any good.'

Helbrecht halted and placed his artificial hand upon Bayard's pauldron. 'Until you relinquish the black sword in death, brother, you are a lord of this Chapter. Do not abandon yourself to your fate so readily. You have much to give, and your death might lie years away. We all die, Bayard. Give what you can while you can. The Emperor chose you – that is why you stand in council with us. Bury your misgivings. Not only your hand but your words are guided by the greatest of powers, and they are heeded.'

'Yes, my lord.' Bayard fell silent.

'There is something else that troubles you, Champion?'

'You know your warriors well, my liege. I cannot hide my innermost thoughts from you.'

'Speak.'

‘It is this. I know my fate, and although I do not wish to throw my life away, the wait for my life’s…’ He searched for the correct word. ‘… resolution is hard on me. I have this great honour at my side.’ He gripped the hilt of the black sword swinging from its hanger on his belt. ‘I would dearly love to use it. Grimaldus was right in that. Why must we wait? Defence, waiting… Neither have ever been our Chapter’s way.’

‘Champion Bayard, you will have your chance soon enough,’ Helbrecht answered assuredly. Such confidence, such surety of purpose. Bayard admired him greatly, which is why he took what Helbrecht had to say next remarkably well. ‘You are to remain behind with Reclusiarch Grimaldus and Forgemaster Jurisian.’

‘My liege, I… I do not know what to say.’

‘You do not know what I *expect* you to say,’ corrected Helbrecht. ‘Do you accept the honour without argument as you should, or protest your wish to remain at my side as Grimaldus did? I know which path you would find shameful. I know you of old, Bayard. The Chapter is everything to you. This is why the Emperor has blessed you. You will not disobey me. It is unthinkable to you even. But you do not like my decision.’

Bayard made no attempt to hide it. ‘No, my liege. I do not.’

‘You do not like it because you too do not wish to die in defence, when every fibre of our being rages for advance. And you do not like it because you dislike Grimaldus. You opposed his appointment. I care not for these petty feelings. He wrestles with the acceptance of a great legacy, and you see fault in him. He tests himself, Bayard – he is a cautious man as you rightly said and will not rashly hold himself to the measure of his antecedent, no matter that he is obviously worthy. I tell you this – as surely as the Emperor commanded that I be High Marshal, Grimaldus is worthy of the burden placed upon his shoulders. His only flaw is that he is as yet unaware of his suitability. And yet you needle, you complain, you see his reticence as weakness. How does this befit the Champion of the Emperor, to doubt his greatest warrior-priest?’

Beneath his helm, Bayard’s face went pale. ‘I… I… My liege!’ he protested. ‘I had not the thought to disobey my lord,’ Bayard fell to his knees with a crash, his armour joints growling as it compensated for the unexpected movement. Bayard bowed his head.

‘Yes, you did. Grimaldus is conflicted, but his actions in there reflected

poorly on us. You would not bring the same minor dishonour upon me.’ Helbrecht grasped Bayard’s arm and pulled him upright. ‘On your feet, Champion. You bear a black sword, second only in sacredness to the blade I wear. You are a chosen of the Emperor, a champion of the elect. Humility is not for the likes of us.’

Bayard stood.

‘I command you to go with Grimaldus, so go with him, my brother, with no ill will and with iron righteousness in your soul. Do so with no doubt in your heart, and with honour foremost in your mind. You carry the legacy of Sigismund himself in your right hand. Do not dishonour it. Do not dishonour *me*.’

‘Yes, my liege.’

Helbrecht held out his hand. Bayard bowed from the waist, took it in both his own and kissed the armoured fingers.

‘I return to the *Eternal Crusader*. May the Emperor bring you a worthy death, Champion Bayard. Do not sell yourself cheaply.’

They walked the remaining distance to the landing fields in quiet discussion of tactics and shared glories of the past, periods of silence more common than those of words.

When they reached the field, Helbrecht’s transport was preparing for the journey to low orbit, the building whine of its engines loud in the dawn. There Helbrecht left Bayard with a stern blessing.

‘Die well, Champion.’

Bayard let out a shaky breath. His destiny was set. As much as his impatience nipped at his heels, demanding he run fast towards his glorious end, now it was in motion he felt the electric touch of apprehension.

He watched Helbrecht depart, knowing that he would never see his lord again.

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CHAPTER FIVE

FIRST ACTIONS

A day before the long-range battle with the orks was joined, Admiral Parol's battlegroup came in from the outer reaches of the system. His ship, the Apocalypse-class *His Will*, bore damage all over its hull. Others limped, trailing clouds of discharge from wounded engines. These were the halest, the more badly damaged having retreated to the Naval base at St Jowen's Dock which, other than a limited assault, the orks had thankfully bypassed in their rush to the system capital.

When the damage to *His Will* became apparent and news of the loss of its sister *Triumph* spread to the waiting fleet, the mood on the ships became sombre.

The orks came closer. When the largest of their craft resolved into diamond chips of light, the gathered Imperial fleet opened fire. Every vessel turned, bringing their powerful broadsides to bear. There were four great Imperial Navy battleships alone, all capable of reducing a continent to rubble. Their decks shook for hour after hour as they cast their shells at the approaching ork horde. Still they came on. For a day and a night the void twinkled with the light of a million false stars and miniature novae as the ork fleet flew into the opening Imperial bombardment.

And then, with disorienting suddenness, the ork ships were upon the fleet. For days they had been an imminent threat, and yet distant. Then an endless armada of scrap-cruisers and modified space hulks filled the void as far as the human eye could see. The actuality of their arrival hardened hearts and resolved wavering souls. There could be no retreat from this. Cowardice would avail a man of nothing.

Hurling crude missiles before them, the ork fleet moved in to attack with all the subtlety of a landslide.

The Third War for Armageddon began in earnest.

‘Correct bombardment drift!’ bellowed Helbrecht. ‘Omega Marines vessel *Notoriety*, pull back. You are being pushed off course by discharge reaction and drifting forwards of your attack group. I repeat, pull back! Raptors attack wing gamma, hold steady!’ Helbrecht gave orders to the assembled might of a score of Chapters, their strike cruisers and battle-barges deferring to his judgement. The Imperial fleet was a wall, the orks a besieging horde of savages.

There were no tactics here, no manoeuvres. The Space Marine fleet far outnumbered Battlefleet Armageddon’s capital ships, but their craft were made for planetary assault and not best suited to ship warfare. Wave after wave of badly wrought ork cruisers came at them, casting a hail of missiles in front. Beyond, seven space hulks waited. The Space Marines were capable of laying down punishing salvos of fire, but their bombardment cannons lacked the precision of Navy guns.

Each hulk was followed by a trail of heavily armed asteroid fortresses, dragged on in the hulks’ gravitic wake, preventing attack to their rear. Parol’s early attempts to exploit this weakness had been comprehensively beaten back. Should the hulks have closed, they ran the risk of being annihilated by the battle-barges’ bombardment cannons; instead, their cruisers bore the brunt of the shelling, catching the rounds on their shields as they incessantly probed for weakness.

Strike cruisers cut back and forth as fast as they could in interdiction, intercepting breakaway squadrons of orkish craft getting too close to the world. All the while, the battle-barges’ guns spat fury at the invaders. Arranged in a giant box thousands of kilometres across, they made a fortress into which no ork vessel might come without being targeted by multiple Imperial ships. Initially, this proved successful, but Armageddon’s orbital defence network fared badly. Spread across the planet’s low orbits, it was being isolated and destroyed. One of the major forts was burning already. Another had ceased firing after three ork cruisers crash-landed into it, disgorging a horde of howling monsters. As they fell silent, the intensity of the Imperial bombardment slackened, and the orks drew closer to

Armageddon.

‘We’ve another message from Armageddon High Anchor Station, my liege,’ reported a vox-officer. There were dozens like him, human servants of the Chapter arrayed in stepped banks at their consoles, outnumbered by servitors in the same ratio that they outnumbered the Adeptus Astartes. Their voices were a racket, a hundred competing, each one the carrier of urgent news.

‘Acknowledge request for aid, Armageddon High Anchor. Iron Champions Third Company inbound.’ Helbrecht looked to the line of hulks waiting in the distance. The *Eternal Crusader* shook as another Space Marine escort craft exploded into an expanding cloud of vaporised metal. ‘They wait. Why? What is the status of the ork hulks?’

‘No firing solutions on the hulks, my lord. They remain out of effective range of our lance batteries,’ said Shipmaster Baloster.

‘They are sacrificing their ships,’ said Helbrecht. ‘This mess they’re creating is a far more effective shield than any energy field. Inform me when debris saturation exceeds fifteen hundred tonnes per cubic kilometre.’

‘Yes, my liege,’ said Baloster.

‘My liege!’ A frantic shout from one of the operations desks was heard. Helbrecht leaned on the railing of his command dais to look at the serf who had spoken.

‘Battle-barge *Victus* is taking heavy damage, my liege,’ said a vox-serf.

Helbrecht took a data-slate from an attendant. The image of the Flesh Tearers flagship displayed upon it was so covered in damage indicator runes that the hull was obscured. ‘Tell them to fall back. Strike group Calisthenis, move around to escort them away.’

The *Eternal Crusader* shuddered as a barrage of orkish cannon rounds pounded against its side. A ship caught Helbrecht’s eye.

‘Which ship is that? There’s a vessel crossing their departure vector. Get me a clearer image! This damned display’s too crowded.’

His servants dutifully focused the main holograph on the ship he indicated. A wireframe ghost sailed through the air, blinking red. In the oculus display, a real-time true-pict showed the craft wallowing hopelessly out of formation. Trails of multicoloured plasmas leaked from its venting ports in a desperate attempt to forestall reactor death. A soapy flash marked the collapse of its last void shield, and fire bloomed all along its length as scrap

missiles and gravity-weapon-hurled rocks battered at it hard.

‘Celestial Lions cruiser *Lavi*, my liege. It is about to be overwhelmed.’

‘Emperor, it’s going to fly right into the *Victus*!’ said Baloster.

‘Pull up! Pull up! *Lavi*, pull up!’ shouted Helbrecht. His orders were repeated a dozen times by human and cyborg throats. A garbled message burbled through in response, but no words could be teased from it.

They heard though, at least they heard. The Celestial Lions vessel fired all its manoeuvring jets; it turned painfully slowly, inching away from the *Victus*’s flight vector. Helbrecht clenched his bionic fist, praying they would make it, but their helmsman lost control. The engines pivoted up and over as the *Lavi* went into a slow tumble. *Victus* attempted evasive manoeuvres, itself still taking plenty of fire from ork cruisers sensing a kill. The *Victus* rolled ponderously to the side, but the *Lavi* was by now little better than a runaway and was on a direct collision course. The Celestial Lions ship slammed into the Flesh Tearers *Victus*, dragging its hull diagonally up across the battle-barge’s long, battle-scarred neck.

The oculus display flash-burned images of destruction into their retinas as the bottom was torn out of the *Lavi*.

‘Blood of the Saints! *Victus*, *Victus!* Chapter Master Seth, do you hear me? Do you hear me? Hail him!’

The two ships sailed past one another, trailing clouds of debris. The keel line of the *Lavi* was gone, its lower decks a tangled web of bent spars and curled plating.

An image of Gabriel Seth fizzed into existence at the corner of a holo display. ‘I hear you, High Marshal. We still have power and engines, but *Victus* has been badly damaged. I am almost entirely without weapons.’

‘Stand ready for escort, Chapter Master. Help is inbound. Get out of here.’

‘Get aid to the *Lavi!* Now!’ shouted a voice. Helbrecht turned his attention to see the ship fall into the gravitic trap of the world below, fire boiling out of its underside.

‘Four hours to impact. They have an orbit, but it decays, my liege.’

‘Augur team, see if anyone is alive. Calculate a rescue plan if possible. Every dead Space Marine is a small victory for the orks.’

His deck officers saluted. Nobody said anything about the three thousand mortal lives aboard the ship.

‘Maintain bombardment,’ Helbrecht ordered. ‘They will run out of ships

eventually. I want–’

A titanic detonation bloomed across the lower portion of the oculus, racing up the display until it consumed the room. The Chapter-serfs flinched; so bright was the representation, it seemed for a moment that the *Eternal Crusader* had taken a critical hit itself. Atomised metal and lives turned into a physical blow blasting outwards into the fleet. The *Eternal Crusader* rolled with the shockwave of the explosion, thrusters jetting as it fought to maintain position.

The babble of orders and reports across the command deck reached a frantic level.

‘The *Laudator*, my liege. The *Laudator* has been destroyed.’

A battle-barge of the Celebrants. An incalculable loss to the Imperium at large, and a disaster for Armageddon’s defence.

The *Laudator* had been with the *Victus*. Helbrecht ran searching eyes all over the displays. A ragged hole had opened up in the kill box. Immediately, several large, ugly ork ships started a run for the breach.

‘My lord! Long range augur sensors show multiple power signatures on the hulks,’ reported Baloster.

‘They play their hand. They are coming. We shall make them pay in blood for every ork whose feet dirty Armageddon! Praise be!’ he roared.

‘Praise be!’ shouted his men.

All the while the space hulks drew closer.

The next six hours were a frantic blur of split-second decisions. Helbrecht kept up a steady stream of orders as the orks burst through the line. As much as they tried to maintain the wall of fire, with ork ships swarming all around them, the vessels of the Adeptus Astartes were soon fully occupied trying to keep themselves from being destroyed. At the end of those hours, the hulks of Warlord Ghazghkull’s invasion forced their way into Helbrecht’s formation.

With the cordon around the world broken in half a dozen places by the space hulks, small, swift landing ships hurried through while the hulks began a bombardment. Fusion bombs rained down from the battle-barges in return, slamming into the hulks. Where they scored hits, the rock and steel of the ork vessels became pockmarked by glowing craters. But the hulks were so vast, so heavily armoured and protected by energy fields and anti-ordnance fire that it did little good.

Under the hulks' protection, the orks' rustships pierced the diffuse layers of the outer atmosphere, hulls glowing as they descended. Imperial ships pirouetted, delicately avoiding each other, trying to keep their guns trained on the landing craft, but there were too many to destroy. The High Marshal roared out his anger at them.

'All Adeptus Astartes vessels! Concentrate all fire on the hulk designate *Woeful Desolation*. Naval strike wings, keep the battle-barges free of ork attack. We'll take one of these abominations down before we retreat.' A chorus of thirty different Imperial dialects acknowledged him.

Servitors gabbled their sluggish alarms.

'We've energy spikes from all over the hulks, my liege, unknown source or purpose,' said an augur officer.

'My liege, we have reports of orks landing all over the surface,' said another.

'How is that possible? None of their ships have made landfall. Teleportation? It is said they used such technology during the invasion of Piscina Four,' said Helbrecht.

'Aye, my lord. No ships, orks appearing out of nowhere,' confirmed Baloster.

'Concentrate fire! Destroy the *Woeful Desolation*!'

Helbrecht had chosen the hulk on a whim. All were bespoke creations, no recognisable class. Their capabilities and intended purpose were unknown. Some were bewildering mishmashes of rock and derelicts – true, warp-forged space hulks adapted by the orks. Others appeared to have been constructed, while two were giant asteroids festooned with ramshackle towers and thrusters. *Woeful Desolation* paid richly for the actions of its fellows. The rain of fusion bombs slamming into it overwhelmed the hulk's crackling green energy fields. As they impacted on its void-worn surface, the outer layers were turned to ruddy slag. Still it persisted, until one of the lava bombs broke through into some vital internal space. With a tremendous heave, its back broke, scattering rubble and metal all across Armageddon's upper orbits, troubling already damaged ships and knocking void shields down across a swathe of Helbrecht's fleet.

A cheer went up on the command deck. 'Praise be!' the serfs and brothers of the Black Templars shouted. 'Praise be!'

Helbrecht did not join their cheers; his attention remained on the

bewildering dance of hundreds of ships across the command deck displays.

The Imperial fleet was in a poor position. The orks had effectively dismantled its formation. Many of the attackers died, but so close to the planet, that the ships the massed Space Marines fleet shot down were as much a hazard as those they didn't. The downed craft became missiles, spearing towards the planet bearing the promise of destruction as surely as if they had still been packed with living orks.

'My liege, you should take a look at this,' Baloster called, drawing Helbrecht's attention to a section of the screen, which he duly magnified.

Helbrecht watched on the oculus as an asteroid was catapulted from an aperture at the front of a hulk they had dubbed the *Malevolent Dread.* The asteroid, vaster than an island, tumbled with deceptive slowness towards the world below. It skipped across the surface of the world's blanket of air, glowing hotter as friction did its work. On its second orbit, it was dragged down into the haze beneath. The impact came twelve minutes later. The plume of superheated vapour it threw out reached all the way into the upper atmosphere, the blast front racing out across the wastelands of Armageddon at supersonic speed, destroying everything in its way.

'Hades Hive has been destroyed, my liege,' said Baloster.

'As Yarrick predicted,' said Helbrecht dispassionately.

And then the *Malevolent Dread* turned its guns upon the *Eternal Crusader*. Crude cannons wheeled out of irregular apertures all along the thing's ugly spine. Welded artlessly together from two massive ships, one alien of unknown origin, the other ancient Imperial, the *Malevolent Dread* was a graceless chimera of a ship, but deadly.

Blasts of green lightning hurled themselves across space, writhing all over the *Eternal Crusader*'s shields. They flared brighter and brighter, struggling to shrug off the actinic energy wracking them.

With a tortured groan, the shields collapsed. The *Eternal Crusader* was wide open to attacks from all quarters, and they came. As if the Black Templars flagship had been identified as key to the Imperial defence, a hundred ork attack craft assailed it simultaneously.

The ship rumbled under the assault.

'Get the shields up!' ordered Helbrecht. He came to a decision. 'Hail Admiral Parol. Prepare for retreat.'

Parol's voice sounded out over the command deck, vying with the noise of

the *Eternal Crusader* at war.

‘High Marshal,’ said Parol. He was harassed, but the steel in him shone through. His manner suggested that Helbrecht make this quick.

‘They are too many – we are too many, admiral. We’re getting in each other’s way. Your ships are too few for this fight, and our ships are certainly not intended for this kind of warfare. We must pull back, and engage them from a distance – let us see if we can convince a few of the orks to follow us and break up their attack.’

‘Agreed,’ said Parol. ‘We have had some success harrying the advance, but we cannot sustain this level of attrition. The war must be fought on the surface, for now.’

Parol signed off.

‘Signal Grimaldus,’ said Helbrecht. Down there, it was the calm before the storm. In minutes, that calm would be swept away.

‘I can’t raise him, my liege.’

‘Then take this message, and send it into the vox-network.’ Helbrecht began, pitching his voice so that it cut through the racket of bombardment. ‘Helsreach, this is *Crusader*. We are breaking from the planet. The orbital war is lost.’ A weapons platform burst apart in a briefly lived orange fireball, the shockwave causing the ship to rumble and punctuating Helbrecht’s speech with its destruction. ‘Repeat, the orbital war is lost. Grimaldus… Once you hear these words, stand ready. You are Mordred’s heir, and my trust rides with you. Hell is coming, brother. The Great Beast’s fleet is without number, but faith and fury will see your duty done.

‘Grimaldus, die well.’

Helbrecht took a deep breath. ‘Message ends. All ships retreat, all ships retreat! Break from orbit. We will return when the odds favour us better.’

The *Eternal Crusader*’s engines howled in protest as the ship’s pilots brought it about and pointed its ornate prow away from Armageddon. Firing all the way, the warship departed, the battered fleets of a dozen Space Marine Chapters flying after.

Three days later, the fleets of the Imperium gathered in orbit of Armageddon’s primary gas giant to regroup. Fleet tenders from St Jowen’s Dock dodged ork blockades to bring ammunition, supplies and crew. All over the fleet, repair tugs and service vehicles flew to and fro, the brittle

electric sparks of Adeptus Mechanicus and Imperial Navy repair crews twinkling upon damaged hulls.

His Will was moored alongside the *Eternal Crusader*. Within the High Marshal's quarters, Admiral Parol took counsel with Helbrecht.

Parol was a slender man, thin-faced with an aquiline nose underlined by a pencil moustache. He had a cynical kind of expression, not helped by his features being twisted out of shape by his shipmaster's ocular augmetics and interface. He was shrewish on occasion, but shrewd, and respected because of that.

He disliked dealing with the Adeptus Astartes on their own ground; everything was too damned big. Trying and failing to get comfortable in their ludicrous furniture while they towered over him made him feel like a child, dragged before the Magna Domina for some schoolboy transgression at the schola navitas. There was something nightmarish about it all. Aboard his ship, surrounded by his officers and with a spread of the Navy's greatest vessels at his beck and call, Parol felt not invincible, because that kind of thinking got a voidsman dead very quickly, but *potent*. In the chambers of this giant, he felt robbed of all his power. That the High Marshal was completely devoid of expression did not help. Space Marines could be difficult to read at the best of times; beyond fervour and aggression, their emotional range was so limited. Helbrecht was worse than most. His face showed nothing of his feelings. Even though his gruff voice rumbled words heavy with respect for Parol, it somehow made no difference. The admiral couldn't help the feeling that he was being reprimanded.

I'm the second son of an Imperial commander, he reminded himself. My father ran a Blessed-Throne *planet*. I've a million men under my command.

He still couldn't shake the feeling.

'You're a fine admiral, Parol,' Helbrecht was saying. 'I know what you achieved at Pelucidar. This isolation and destruction of the first ork hulks is very fine voidsmanship. And approaching assault group Gamma 14 with your engines cut to avoid detection was an admirably intelligent move.'

'My thanks to you, Lord High Marshal,' said Parol, shifting uncomfortably in his oversized chair. The goblet was a bucket in his hand, enough wine sloshing in its bowl to render every one of his command deck crew insensible, he reckoned. 'The orks have their beachheads on Armageddon Prime. They are gathered about Armageddon in too great a force. There is

nothing we can do about that, but we can disrupt their supply and reinforcement, and destroy the unwary. Once the Season of Fire begins, they will be unable to land at all. It is my contention that they will become bored and a portion of the fleet will move away from Armageddon towards other targets. Once the fleet breaks up, they will be vulnerable.'

'Are you certain of this?' asked Helbrecht. Not so much a question as a test of Parol's knowledge, the admiral felt.

'Of course. Not even the Great Beast can constrain the greenskins' lust for violence. We can use this to our advantage.'

'Agreed,' said Helbrecht. 'Your battlefleet should continue with its current strategy of seek and destroy. We Adeptus Astartes will switch tactics as of now, however.'

Parol leaned forwards to put his giant drink on the table. He slipped on the edge of Helbrecht's chair, and was forced to brace himself clumsily with his foot. Not only was the chair too big for him, it was extremely hard. He gave up and stood. Even then, the sitting Helbrecht's eyeline fell only a short way below Parol's own. Parol drew himself up in an unconscious attempt to appear larger, caught himself doing it, and felt ridiculous.

'You are speaking of boarding actions, I presume. That is more to your liking. The Black Templars, the other Chapters… Direct assault.'

Helbrecht nodded. 'More of our brother Chapters are inbound from the rest of the sector. Ork presence is lighter outside of the Armageddon System proper than feared. I have a number of astropathic messages promising aid. I will transmit them to the Adeptus Astartes fleet.'

'These men would be better on the surface, surely…' said Parol, waving his hand as a conclusion to his trailing sentence.

'Exactly my thinking, admiral. The Adeptus Astartes will best serve the Emperor on the surface. I have spoken with many others of my brothers from other Chapters, including Chapter Master Tu'Shan of the Salamanders. Several of them wish to make orbital insertion to bolster the defences. We have more than enough warriors to defend our fleet and make sorties against the enemy hulks.'

'I understand,' said Parol. 'How many ships will need to approach?'

'In total, perhaps twenty. I estimate we will have gathered approximately thirteen companies of Adeptus Astartes, according to Guilliman's codex.' Helbrecht managed to make this sound like an insult; his kind had never

had much time for the strictures of the Ultramarines primarch. ‘A deployment of fifty-eight Thunderhawks, eighty-nine drop pods – mass deployment is to be recommended.’

‘Naturally.’

‘The Salamanders have a large contingent currently aboard the *Serpentine*. There are many others. We should rely on speed. I have advised my brothers to remove their men to their strike cruisers and leave their barges behind. This will be a blockade run, nothing more. We cannot risk being mired in orbit again.’

Parol twisted his hands into one another behind his back and looked out to the assembled fleet. Not a single ship was free of damage. ‘Another approach to Armageddon itself. This is a somewhat inadvisable course of action.’

‘It cannot be done any other way, lord admiral.’

‘I am aware of that, Lord High Marshal,’ said Parol, struggling to keep the waspish tone from his voice. ‘But it is nevertheless a difficult proposition.’

‘But not impossible.’

‘Indeed, no.’ Parol looked around the room in curiosity, a moment of distraction. Not thinking about the war only for that instant, he felt how immensely tired he was. Exhaustion was like a heavy cape sodden with rain dragging at his shoulders.

Helbrecht was not done. ‘There is more, admiral. Once the orbital insertion is complete, I will depart for a short time on business of my own.’

That got Parol’s attention. He turned quickly on his heels to look at Helbrecht. ‘What? What did you say?’

The High Marshal remained expressionless. ‘Marshals Amalrich and Ricard are travelling to our Chapter keep at Fergax. I am to go to them to form a grand congregation of my Chapter.’

‘And why can they not come here to you?’

‘Because I have an idea, admiral. One that will better serve our efforts than ordering them into the system piecemeal.’

‘The other Space Marines will not unify behind another commander.’

Helbrecht shook his head. ‘They will. You.’

‘If that were the case I would be delighted, High Marshal,’ said Parol. ‘But I doubt it. There is bound to be disunity. If I were a betting man, and I am from time to time, that’s a wager I would gladly take.’

‘Yes,’ conceded Helbrecht. ‘You are correct, but it will play a part in my plan. I have ordered the Adeptus Astartes fleet to disperse anyway, to undertake hit and run and boarding actions separate from the combined fleet. Let them fight as Chapter units for a while. This should encourage the orks to fragment, and draw a portion of them away before the Season of Fire begins. I will not be gone long. I aim to return before the commencement of the Season of Shadows.’

‘Very well,’ sighed Parol. ‘Emperor knows, High Marshal Helbrecht, you are a skilled fleetmaster and a renowned warrior. I am sure you have your reasons. You will share them, I hope?’

‘Yes,’ said Helbrecht, in a way that quite definitely did not mean ‘of course’.

‘Good. What should be our next move? These boarding actions you mention, Lord High Marshal. Let us coordinate the first of those.’

Helbrecht gave Parol an unreadable look. ‘One thing at a time, admiral.’

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CHAPTER SIX

A GATHERING OF BROTHERS

Fergax turned peacefully beneath the ventral weapon mounts of the *Eternal Crusader*, green and ignorant of the endless wars wracking the heavens. A feral world, innocent in spirit, some might think. The people there lived hard but simple lives, their greatest contribution to the Imperium being a supply of recruits for the Black Templars crusades. The world hosted a Chapter keep; aside from that, the Emperor and all his doings were myths to its inhabitants.

The Chapter anchor at Fergax played host to more brothers of the order than had been gathered simultaneously for two thousand years. The aged castellan, a Space Marine too damaged to fight further, had been extremely relieved when Helbrecht informed him that the Black Templars would not be descending to the surface en masse, but would remain in orbit.

Above the backwater world, more ships had joined the Black Templars fleet: the cruiser *Virtue of Kings*, commanded by Marshal Amalrich of the Damaris Crusade, and the battle-barge *Light of Purity*, lead vessel of the Tiberor Crusade under Ricard. Five more escorts came with them to bolster Helbrecht's destroyer and light cruiser squadrons. Three combined crusades of the Black Templars were, by any measure, a powerful force.

Helbrecht greeted his marshals in person as they arrived on one of the *Eternal Crusader*'s cavernous embarkation decks. Amalrich landed as Helbrecht, Theoderic and their entourage of honour guard, sergeant-serfs and mortal priests arrived at the deck. Amalrich's Thunderhawk was as black as interstellar space, its hard angles brightened by the marshal's personal heraldry.

Amalrich, the younger of the two, strode down the gangplank. Four Sword Brethren of humourless demeanour and a dozen shield-serfs came after him. All looked as if doomsday was upon them, except the marshal himself, who wore a broad smile. He took Helbrecht's armoured forearm in the warrior's grasp. 'Brother Helbrecht! Master of Sanctity Theoderic. How goes the war at Armageddon?'

'Badly,' said Helbrecht.

Amalrich pulled a concerned expression tinged with disbelief.

'I had heard you had destroyed three hulks through boarding actions alone, my liege.'

'I have,' said Helbrecht. 'It is not enough.'

Honking klaxons announced the arrival of Ricard. A serf officer's warnings echoed over the landed craft arrayed neatly down the length of the deck, the tail end of his orders lost to the scream of engines as Ricard's Thunderhawk blasted from the launch tubes. Armsmen, deck-serfs and forge thralls marched to their positions, ready to welcome the machine-spirit of the ship. With a wash of acrid exhaust, the ship came to a gentle hover and landed with the clanking of spreading landing claws.

'I have news, brother!' shouted Amalrich over the roar of Ricard's ship. 'A Champion has arisen.'

'Truly?' shouted Helbrecht, although he had no reason to doubt his commander. His reticence came from what the news betokened. His thoughts went to Grimaldus at Helsreach.

'Yes, my liege! Yes! We have removed our black sword from its stasis field, and begun the rituals of sanctity,' said Amalrich. Pride was on him like raiment; it was honour for a Champion to arise in his crusade.

'I left Brother-Champion Bayard upon Armageddon at Reclusiarch Grimaldus's side,' said Helbrecht.

The Thunderhawk's engines cycled down to tolerable levels. Amalrich's voice lost some of his pleasure along with its volume. 'You have not heard, then, that he has fallen?'

'We are fresh from the warp, and have received no message.'

'I am sorry, my liege. I had not realised that a Champion had arisen in your crusade. This is as bad news as it is good.'

Sorrow engulfed Helbrecht, but he allowed none to show. 'It is joyous. One falls, another arises to feel the divine grace of the Emperor. Praise be.'

‘Praise be, brother.’

Announced by the clamour of docking rituals and hymns of welcome, the second Thunderhawk’s assault ramp hissed open, disgorging Marshal Ricard and his Sword Brethren. All were shaven headed and sported moustaches. White cloaks lined with red swept around their feet.

‘Ricard!’ said Amalrich, with plain delight.

Ricard was between the ages of Helbrecht and Amalrich in years, and similarly disposed in humour: not as grim as his lord, and not as cheery as his peer.

‘It is good to see you all. Brother Helbrecht.’ Ricard bowed his head and took Helbrecht’s hands in one of his own. ‘I am pleased my choice was backed by the others. You will be a fine High Marshal.’

‘We shall see,’ said Helbrecht. He had no desire to go into the debacle of the Ghoul Stars Crusade.

‘Master of Sanctity,’ Ricard said to Theoderic. ‘Might I beg the indulgence of your blessing before we depart?’

‘You may, marshal. The Emperor will show you his favour.’

Ricard bowed.

‘I was informing the High Marshal of the advent of our Champion,’ said Amalrich.

‘It is a boy who has heard the Emperor’s call, I understand,’ said Ricard.

‘Vosper is his name, my liege,’ explained Amalrich to Helbrecht. ‘He is young, a neophyte, but close to finishing his training. The visions came upon him three nights ago, and grow in strength. He is a worthy Champion, my liege.’

‘Then Bayard is dead,’ said Ricard. ‘I am sorry, my liege. We lose a fine brother.’

‘He is certain to have died a hero’s death. May the Emperor shield his soul,’ said Theoderic.

‘Praise be,’ they all murmured, and shared a moment of silence.

Helbrecht rubbed at his chin, the brass of his bionic hand rasping against his stubble. ‘Does the boy…’

‘Vosper, my liege.’

‘Does Brother Vosper know what this means?’

‘Yes, my liege,’ said the marshal. ‘He has undergone initiation into the third mysteries.’

‘And he knows no fear?’

‘None, my lord. He is among our most promising neophytes. He shows only faith, and a desire to die for the Emperor.’

‘Chaplain Theoderic, this coming of a second Champion so soon after the demise of the first is unusual. And in one so young. What do you make of it?’

Theoderic made a fist, and contemplated the skull-adorned knuckles of his gauntlet a moment, as if the answers were hiding in their empty eye sockets.

‘It is highly unusual, my liege, but there is no reason why it should not be so. The Emperor works in mysterious ways. Now, at this dark hour, he comes to our aid directly. The youthfulness of this vessel, Vosper, is perhaps indicative of his purity. No matter his experience in war, the Emperor will fill him with his might. If Bayard is dead, it was meant to be. And we have a new Champion to return to Armageddon with. In my opinion, it is a sign that the Emperor is with us, my liege. Praise be.’

‘Praise be,’ the others responded. Automatically, without thought. The praising of the Lord of Mankind waited always on their tongues.

‘The visions have proven true, my liege,’ said Amalrich. ‘He has been tested by my crusade’s Chaplains. He has undergone all the trials.’

Helbrecht looked at Theoderic.

‘Dagal and Leofald, my liege. The Chaplains of Amalrich’s crusade.’

Helbrecht nodded in recognition. ‘Good priests. I am sure they have been thorough, but we must be certain. Amalrich, have the Master of Sanctity examine this Brother Vosper.’

‘At once, my liege,’ said Amalrich, beckoning for his shield-serfs, telling them to relay orders to the *Virtue of Kings* to make the neophyte ready.

‘What of our crusades, High Marshal?’ asked Ricard.

‘They are done. If circumstances permit, you will be despatched to bring them to successful conclusion once the war for Armageddon is at an end.’

‘The banners then?’

‘Keep them with all honour. Your crusades are suspended, not dissolved.’

Ricard and Amalrich bowed. ‘Thank you, my liege,’ said Ricard.

‘I am sure the vorteth will appreciate the rest,’ said Amalrich. ‘Let them feel safe in their burrows for a few years more – their extermination will be all the sweeter for their reprieve.’

‘Well said, Amalrich,’ said Ricard.

‘I will go at once, by your leave, my liege,’ said Theoderic.

Helbrecht gave his assent.

‘You may use my ship as your own, Chaplain,’ said Amalrich. ‘Our business will keep me here a while, I am guessing.’

‘Emperor bless and keep you, brother.’

Theoderic left, the Thunderhawk switching immediately to takeoff protocols.

‘So then,’ said Amalrich to Helbrecht, his friend and master, ‘tell us of this ork who would foolishly defy the God-Emperor of Mankind.’

‘He is no fool,’ said Helbrecht.

For three days the marshals conferred with one another while fresh neophytes were gathered from the Chapter keep’s training priories on Fergax. Eighty-four were judged ready for ascension. Meanwhile, in the holiest places of the *Virtue of Kings*, Theoderic questioned the young Space Marine Vosper. On the fourth day, he returned with joyous news.

Neophyte Vosper entered the Chamber of Sigismund with wonder and trepidation writ plainly on his face. He tried manfully to keep to the prescribed walk of entrance – small steps were required from one as junior as he. Head bowed, he made slow progress forwards, in time to the chanting of the Chapter’s thrall-monks, but he couldn’t help himself from glancing at the ostentation surrounding him, so different to the training decks. Three dozen Sword Brethren from three crusades lined the way to Helbrecht’s throne, their armour highly ornate, chased with gold and platinum, the darkness of the plate enlivened by the bright colour bursts of their own heraldry. A crowd of the Chapter’s best – Adeptus Astartes and unmodified human servants – waited for him. Representatives of every branch of their order, including one of the Chapter Ancients entombed in a hulking suit of Dreadnought armour. The Praeses-Sword Brother who stood next to his lord’s throne bore a massive sword in its scabbard, wrapped all about with ribbons and oath-papers.

Still young, Vosper was already fearless, but awe made itself known to him then.

Helbrecht stood up from his throne as Vosper reached the foot of his dais. All those present made the Templars sign, crossing their forearms in front of themselves. The sudden clash of metal on metal was startling. Vosper

dropped to his knees, his supplicant's robes pooling around him.

Helbrecht spoke, and his voice was by far the most overwhelming thing Vosper had ever heard, although the High Marshal wore no helmet to amplify his words and spoke no louder than a man in conversation. 'We welcome you to the Inner Circle, brother of the Black Templars, son of Rogal Dorn, successor of Sigismund. What you see and hear within this chamber shall be repeated to none outside these walls. Do you understand?'

'Yes, my liege.'

'Then be at ease, Brother Vosper.'

Vosper remained kneeling.

'You may stand, brother,' said Theoderic gently. 'You are a member of the Inner Circle now.'

Vosper did as he was told, his wondering gaze switching from one grim warrior to the next, each resplendent in their robes and heavily ornamented battleplate. 'You call me brother, but I… I am a neophyte, my lord.'

'Are you suggesting that the High Marshal is mistaken?' said Ricard.

'No, no! Forgive me, my lords.'

'We are all equals within this precinct, Brother Vosper,' said Helbrecht. 'You may refer to all here simply as brother, except I. Have you completed your training?'

'Nearly, my liege. I have undergone the final implantation. I await only my Knight's Confirmation.'

'Who is your master, squire?'

'Brother Galbus, my liege.'

'Tell him that you have your confirmation.'

'From you, my liege?' Vosper's face lit up. He dropped to one knee. 'Thank you, lord! Confirmation from you is a great honour.'

Helbrecht shook his head. 'No.' His face remained stern. The neophyte looked up, concerned. 'Confirmation does not come from me.'

'My liege? I do not understand.'

'You have been chosen by a higher authority. You have received the Champion's blessing. Your Knight's Confirmation comes from the Emperor himself, brother, not from one so lowly as I.'

Helbrecht bade him rise.

'We pay homage to you,' Helbrecht said. He took the man-high sword from Gulvein. It made a whispered scrape as he pulled it free. The blade

was black, so black it took no reflection, appearing to consume what light dared fall upon it.

‘This is one of the ten black swords of the Black Templars,’ said Helbrecht. He pointed the sword’s tip at Vosper’s face. ‘It was forged of black solarite in ages past. Few have the honour of bearing one, and none for long. It is now yours, if you will take it. Do you accept this role given to you by the Emperor of Mankind, Brother Vosper? Will you take up the black sword and this great boon, and wield it in the service of our lord, in the furtherance of His Great Crusade to purge the stars? Or do you refuse this honour, and will henceforth be stripped of all title, and driven forth, and hunted until slain? The choice is yours.’

‘I accept, my liege, although I am not worthy.’

‘You put aside the right to judge your own worth the moment you were chosen to join the Chapter,’ said Theoderic. ‘The Emperor has deemed you fit, and you have no authority to question Him.’

Helbrecht saluted Vosper with the sword, and then, taking the blade in his hand, reversed it and handed the hilt to Vosper, who took it in his hand, his face alight. Theoderic stepped forwards to clasp the lanyard bracelet about the neophyte’s wrist, and locked it in place.

‘Let this blade now never fall from your grasp,’ said the Chaplain. ‘I name you the Emperor’s Champion,’ he said.

‘Emperor’s Champion,’ the others echoed.

‘You are the chosen of the Emperor, and worthy of a good death,’ said Theoderic. ‘We envy and honour you. For our envy, we shall do penance. For the honour of fighting by your side, we will be proud. Praise be.’

‘Praise be!’ the others shouted.

‘You will be taken from this place to a place of arming,’ commanded Helbrecht. ‘You will be equipped in the Sanctis Sanctorum aboard the *Eternal Crusader*. Bring to him the armour of the Champion. Bless him well. When armed and blessed, you will await in prayer within the Temple of Dorn, sainted son of the Emperor. There you will remain until a sign is given unto thee. This you shall reveal only to Master of Sanctity Theoderic. The revelation shall be our signal to go to war.’

‘War! War! War!’ the Inner Circle shouted. ‘Praise be! Praise be! *Praise be!*’

The *Eternal Crusader* was vast. Far bigger than most battle-barges, it dated from a time when a force of Space Marines numbered in the tens of thousands, not mere hundreds. The Black Templars Chapter was slightly larger than most, but even they all gathered together would barely tax the capabilities of the vessel. With the mere two hundred brothers of Helbrecht's Void Crusade aboard, just under a fifth of the Black Templars total strength, a large portion of Sigismund's ship was empty. Two of the five embarkation decks were mothballed, their maintenance status one of barest renewal. Many hangars were seldom used. Practice halls, gymnasia, barracks and armouries were devoid of life. Several decks were rarely visited; one was sealed off and airless. Only servitor constructs roamed these sepulchral spaces, checking endlessly for decay and reporting malfunctions back to the forge.

To reach the Navigator's palace, Helbrecht had to traverse the most eerie of all the *Eternal Crusader*'s quiet places. He must pass through the librarium.

There were no Librarians in the Black Templars Chapter. How long this had been so had been lost to the turning of millennia, for without the expertise of the librarium, the Chapter's records had inevitably fallen into decay.

Helbrecht and his honour guard went into a baroque tunnel that ran along the spine of the vessel, some decks above the main thoroughfare. The towers of the librarium opened up off either side. Up here the ship's breath was more apparent: the creaking moans and sudden, sharp shrieks of metal shifting under stress. Distant systems grumbled or whooped. Clatters sounded from unguessed places. Here, so close to the soundless void, the ship seemed noisier than elsewhere, as if its machine-spirit sought to drown out the silence with its own voice.

The librarium surrounded the access corridor and intensified this sensation. The blast doors into its towers and the deep-thrusting catacombs beneath were welded shut and covered over with hundreds of purity seals. They bore the mark of every Chaplain and High Marshal the Chapter had produced. Some were so old that the parchment had crumbled to dust, the wax cracked away. No cleaning drones came this way, and the trails of previous visitors to the Navigator's palace were faint marks in the dirt.

Helbrecht came here infrequently. Ordinarily, when a meeting was called

for, Jushol went forth from his palace by ways known only to himself, but what Helbrecht would ask his Navigator demanded the proper protocols. He must be visited at home.

He recognised his own seal on a door, fresh looking and still bright red amid the crumbling remnants of his predecessors, a mere eight years old. What lay beyond the doors none now knew. The psychic traces of the Librarians clung to the place, evident in the corridor outside their haunted bastions as a faint sense of unease.

Helbrecht and his men picked up their pace. Soon they left the sealed doors of the librarium behind them as the access way went into less-haunted areas of the ship, and before long they were at the principal entrance to the Navigator's palace, a pair of grand golden gates barring the way. The spinal corridor terminated here, and few might go beyond.

Before Helbrecht could announce himself, the golden doors of the palace creaked inwards, pushed open by slack-mouthed servitors whose wheeled lower parts were set into tracks.

Inside was a world apart. By ancient treaty signed between the Black Templars and House Ju-Sha-Eng, the area beyond the portal was, technically, not part of the *Eternal Crusader* at all, but sovereign house territory. Even Helbrecht could not enter without permission. A group of heavily altered combat thralls clumped forwards on hissing legs, their eyes far too alive for true servitors. They held weapons at the ready in metal hands. Shoulder-mounted meltaguns, bonded into their flesh, panned back and forth over the group of Space Marines. A phalanx of men wearing the exotic colours of House Ju-Sha-Eng formed up behind them, standing to attention, their laser carbines across their chests.

A female menial, her painted face scarified and neck extended upon a tower of brass rings, came forwards from the palace's atrium. She stopped at the threshold of the doors, the place where the domain of the Navigator ended and that of the Black Templars began. In her long service, she had never been beyond the boundary of the palace.

'Welcome to the domicile of Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng, Lord Helbrecht,' she said, revealing filed teeth inlaid with patterns of silver. 'I am House Mistress Talifera, pledge-bound to House Ju-Sha-Eng. I bid you welcome. The Lord Navigator is expecting you.'

Helbrecht had his honour guard wait outside, their inscrutable red helm

lenses locking in uneasy stand-off with the visored eyes, augmetic and biologic, of the Navigator's household troops in.

The palace was a domain unto itself. The gravity here was lower, set to the preferences of Jushol's mutant physique. Although not one of the void-dwelling Navigator clans, he was nevertheless delicate, as many of his kind were.

The rear of the palace extended deep into the ship's spires, sealed off from the rest of the *Eternal Crusader* by multiple blast doors and thick armoured bulkheads. In splendid isolation, the Navigator, far too valuable to risk in battle, could wait out any conflict. But the front part of his domain stood proud of the mass behind it, and this was a tower covered over with a dome. From there he gazed into the warp. It was to here, to the pilot's scrying chamber, that Helbrecht was led.

Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng stood at the console by his throne, consulting with a tech-adept. Maintenance of the chamber was the responsibility of the Navigator's House, not the forge. Like the thralls in Jushol's employ, the adept would be bound to him. The Navigator Houses completed their own treaties with the Adeptus Mechanicus for such work.

Thralls, menials, servitors and the tech-adept bowed and withdrew as Helbrecht entered the chamber.

'My Lord Helbrecht,' spoke the Navigator. 'A welcome interruption to my daily chores.'

'I will keep this short, Lord Navigator Jushol of House Ju-Sha-Eng.' Helbrecht spoke humbly. He bowed his head and held out a scroll tied with a black ribbon. 'I come with a petition.'

Jushol took the scroll in a spindly hand without looking at it. His human eyes did not leave Helbrecht's face for ten long seconds. Under an embroidered scarf wrapped around his brow, his third eye twitched, as if searching for something beyond the blindfold. Then he unrolled and read the request.

Over the scrying chamber was the Acies Horrens, a dome of toughened armourglass reinforced with adamantium rods and threaded with veins of psy-active crystal. Thousands of charms, seals and other holy, esoteric wards were placed upon its muntins.

Nevertheless, although they were in real space, the great bipartite shutters were closed, only to be opened when necessity demanded and the Navigator

must guide the ship through the warp. Helbrecht was an Adeptus Astartes, biogenetically crafted to feel no fear, and yet he was glad the Acies shutters were closed. What that window revealed was unholy, not for men to see, not even men like him.

Jushol rolled the parchment tight and clutched it. ‘Refreshments, High Marshal?’

Female menials came to them, bodies as cosmetically modified as the house mistress’s. Helbrecht supposed they represented some bizarre beauty aesthetic; Jushol certainly looked upon them favourably, his face lighting up with some emotion alien to the High Marshal. The women said nothing to him, other than to pay the proper respect. Their whispering robes were their only voices as they silently gave out sweetmeats and wine. Helbrecht sipped it; it was like no vintage he had ever tasted, born of unfamiliar fruit.

Jushol took his own goblet, his long fingers wrapping delicately around it, too long for a human hand.

‘Soon I must leave the *Eternal Crusader* and return to Terra. My time of bonding approaches. I have license from the Paternova, and the match chosen by my family is propitious. When this is done, I will fly no more. Other duties call.’ What *other duties* were he did not elaborate, and Helbrecht did not ask. The byzantine power struggles of the Navis Nobilite were not his concern.

‘We will miss you, Lord Navigator,’ said Helbrecht. ‘You have proven yourself invaluable to the *Eternal Crusader*.’

‘It is a venerable vessel. It has been my great honour to serve aboard it.’ He looked around the ornamented dome, mixed feelings on his elongated face.

‘You see the light of the Emperor every day – you are truly blessed. Surely you will miss the light of the Astronomican?’

‘If you saw what I saw, my lord, you would not think me blessed at all. But yes, in answer to your question, I will miss it. I will never be blind to the light.’ He tapped the cloth band about his forehead over his third eye. ‘This is the eye that never sleeps. But to guide a starship such as this through the immaterium? I will miss that.’

‘Then this will be my last petition to you, Lord Navigator.’ Helbrecht gestured towards the scroll. ‘Can you do it?’

‘Jumping into a system within the safe zone of the Mandeville point is not

to be advised. Jumping into the midst of a battle… Well, my lord, that is practically suicide, although our gravitic death-wave might well win you the battle. Posthumously, that is.'

Helbrecht glowered. 'Suicide for some, perhaps, Lord Navigator, but our Chapter is guided by the hand of the Emperor himself. Did we not cross the stars to Armageddon with great speed? Was the journey to Fergax not shortened by His intervention? By the same means, we will emerge unscathed and bring his fury down upon our enemy.'

Jushol shrugged equivocally. 'Perhaps.'

'So, can you do it?'

Jushol's eyes slid closed, the movements of his warp eye visible through its silk blindfold like the embryo of a shark twitching in its pouch. 'Yes, yes, my lord, I can. What you suggest is a great risk.' Jushol essayed a smile, tight on his parchment skin. 'But I relish the chance at one last challenge. I will speak with the others of my House within your fleet, but they will not refuse. Where I go, they are pledged to follow. I will gladly do as you ask. When?'

'When the Emperor commands it,' said Helbrecht.

Admiral Parol paced the bridge of *His Will*. He was exhausted by months of warfare, but could not rest. And so, between the endless engagements with the ork fleets, the hit-and-run battles, the ambushes and kill-missions, he walked his command deck until he could walk no more.

'Sir, I have an astropathic response from High Marshal Helbrecht. He has emerged from the warp at Fergax, and has been joined by an additional five hundred members of his Chapter.'

Parol walked around the rows of his bridge officers to the astropathic liaison's desk. He leaned in close to the cogitator screen where the astropath's report scrolled jerkily downwards in an eye-watering green.

'He's been gone a month. That is good news. Does he give notice of when he might return to Armageddon?'

'Yes, sir,' said the officer hesitantly.

'And? And? Go on.'

'It says they are waiting for a sign.'

'A sign?' said Parol.

'From the Emperor.'

‘Obviously from the Emperor, lieutenant. Who else?’ said Parol shortly. The news had agitated him. He wanted Helbrecht back, and soon. ‘I doubt they are hanging on the word of your mother.’

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘Well then.’ Parol stood straight again.

‘Sir,’ said the lieutenant. He was a career officer from a good family, but as one that couldn’t stop his mouth opening half the time, he wasn’t likely to rise far. If he lived.

‘Yes, lieutenant?’

The officer winced, too late now. ‘I always thought the Adeptus Astartes were a little less, well, devout than most of us. I heard that they do not worship the Emperor at all.’

Parol gave the officer a look that left the man wondering whether he’d still have his post come the morning. ‘These ones, lieutenant,’ he leaned in close, conspiratorially, and hissed, ‘are a little bit different.’

The admiral continued his slow swaggering stride along the ranks of his officers’ stations. ‘Keep me apprised, lieutenant. I wish to know that they have set out the moment they send word.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘In the meantime,’ Parol continued, addressing the command deck at large, ‘I am going to my quarters for four hours. I suggest you find a realistic target for *His Will* to destroy by the time I awake. This war will not win itself.’

‘Yes, lord admiral,’ they chorused.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘Carry on.’

Parol went to his quarters, wishing as he reached them that he could afford just a little more time to sleep. He lay in his bed for two hours, his head whirling with strategic possibilities, before his exhaustion took him.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

RETURN TO ARMAGEDDON

‘Concentrate all fire on the *Harbinger of Disaster*!’ shouted Admiral Parol. ‘Do not let my kill slip away!’

‘We can’t get any closer. We’re taking too much–’ A scream blared out into the command deck as a ship took catastrophic damage, reduced in moments from a purposeful instrument of the Emperor’s will to a flaming cloud of scrap.

‘We’ve lost the *Storm of Ages*, admiral.’

The babble of voices on the command deck crowded Parol’s hearing. He shut it out. Before him, the oculus screen showed a dazzle of short-lived white-light explosions and engine burn. Clouds of debris drifted through the maelstrom, further adding to the confusion. Alarms blared as wreckage from the *Storm of Ages’*s demise pattered into the shields of *His Will*. Swarms of mass projectiles, simple but brutal, followed, collapsing more shields. A spread of them penetrated as far as the hull, hammering into the thick skin of the Apocalypse-class battleship.

Parol braced himself as the giant vessel shuddered. Sparks flew from ruptured conduits.

‘Get those damn shields back up now!’ Quarist, his chief flag officer, roared.

‘Damage report!’ said Parol.

‘Minor breaching on decks 100 and 302, admiral.’

‘Helm steady.’

The *Harbinger of Disaster* drifted under them, the haphazard arrangement of crude engines bolted all over its mangled shell making it surprising

manoeuvrable. Parol cursed as it passed under *His Will*'s keel. A trio of ork cruisers came in its gravity wake, all guns blazing.

'Sir, shields are still below fifty per cent.'

As fast as the soap-bubble sheen of the void shields popped into life they were being knocked down by concentrated fire from the front.

'Roll ninety degrees. Port battery, mass fire on the *Harbinger*. Lance batteries, open fire on those cruisers. Battlegroup Glorious Age come around to sector 495. Destroyer groups Augustus, Cleon's Brilliance and Woeful Heart come in closer to our stern. Draw fire from the ork asteroid fortresses. Keep my space free of those cruisers! Fire control, be sharper! How the hell am I supposed to conduct a battle when I'm micromanaging your bloody mistakes!'

'Sir,' came the response from below.

Parol rattled off a long procession of orders. Adjutants cast them onto chart-desk holos with their augments, while data savants ran battle outcomes through their lobotomised brains. Parol kept one eye on the predictions, the other on the battle as it was playing out and gave further orders relayed by data squirt and vox to the ships under his command. The fleet responded with somnolent movements, swinging like logs under water. Too slow, too slow. A lifetime of service in the Navy and still he thought the ships too slow! Sweat ran down Parol's face, soaking the brocade of his high collar, making the flesh around his augmetic eye itch maddeningly. He narrowed his flesh eye, but… but… but… For all that, his plan was working; they were boxing the hulk in, slowly but surely. Waves of bombers chipped away at its stone and metal, ineffectual ork flak guns blasting away at them. Thunderbolt wings scoured the void of ork fighters. The hulk was wide open.

'Cruiser group Annihilus, steady as she goes. Give me four more volleys at this wreck and we'll have ourselves another trophy.'

'Sir, we've another two hulks coming in, sector ninety-six!' shouted an augur officer.

I spoke too soon, thought Parol. 'Give me the designations!' he said.

'It's the *Paean to Discontent*, and… and…'

'Designation! Designation!' shouted Parol.

'The *Malevolent Dread*, sir.'

'It's a trap!' cried Quarist. He slammed his fist into the railing around the

command platform.

‘Steady there, Quarist,’ said Parol from the corner of his mouth. ‘Bring me a view of the approaching flotilla, cast onto chart desk 4-a.’

‘Aye, sir!’ shouted his ratings.

‘Compliance,’ blurted half a dozen servitors.

The two hulks were a fair way off, but lumbering closer.

‘Designate inbound hostiles call-sign “Ork Flotilla Secundus”,’ Parol said – not very imaginative, he thought, but I am rather busy. ‘I want the *Harbinger of Disaster* in pieces before they are in range, is that clear?’

‘Sir, we do not have the time!’

Parol bit back a rebuke. The optimo of his fire control team was correct. A perfect chase, the careful ripping away of power fields, and now to be cheated of his prize as it ran helpless before his guns. Most annoying.

‘I never thought I’d say this sir, but they’re getting cleverer,’ said Quarist. ‘They are responding to our strategy.’

‘Damn it all, of course they are!’ said Parol emphatically. ‘Well, in the best of all possible worlds, the same strategy never works over and again. Although,’ he added to himself, ‘I was rather hoping the orks might fall for it just one more time.’ He jabbed an impatient finger at his vox-officers. ‘Open broad channel, no encryption – if the orks think we’re running, they’ll make more mistakes.’

‘Aye, sir, all channels open.’

Parol smoothed the front of his uniform, and wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief. He would not have his command see him dishevelled, and he’d be damned if he would let the orks believe him scared.

‘Hailing all fleet, hailing all fleet! Belabour that hulk for all you are worth, do as much damage as is possible. Then…’ He paused. ‘Prepare to withdraw. Good order.’

He depressed a stud on a board mounted on the rail.

‘Return to encryption,’ he said. ‘Perhaps we might do a little more on the way out…’

Parol’s orders were complex, but efficiently delivered.

Jushol rode the waves of the empyrean, at one with the *Eternal Crusader*. More than at any other time in the warp, he felt the ship’s presence

intimately – every thrum of its metal skin, every stretch and ache of its superstructure, every phantom urge of its vicious spirit. This was not the mind-bond a princeps might feel with his Titan, or an adept of Mars might feel with his machines. Jushol did not dominate; instead, he shared something of an empathy with the vessel: the way a good horseman has with his mount, it had been explained to him, although no horse had been seen in his clan house in aeons. Like a horseman, Jushol knew his steed's every mood – if it were sick, if it were sorrowful, if it felt joy.

The *Eternal Crusader* was eager; it always had been enamoured of war.

The warp shone through the Acies Horrens, bathing his inhuman face with a light whose colour had no name. His primary eyes were closed, the ritual blindfold now bound tightly about them while he looked out instead through his warp eye, fixing it upon the blazing sun of the Astronomican. The Emperor's beacon cut through the riot of hellish colour, a lighthouse in nightmare fog.

Jushol judged them close to their destination and so he took his attention from the white light of Terra. He stared deep into the swirling patterns in front of the ship, although no such directional term could be held true in the warp. The ship shuddered as it breasted swells of emotion, the warp whipped up into a curdled mass of despair and rage by the war going on at Armageddon. Into these roils his jet-black third eye peered intently, seeking out smaller, subtler disturbances – places where gravity infinitesimally pulled on the no-place of the warp, distorting it. These tiny whorls of psychic foam marked out the skerries of reality. Combine this with the agitation of human beings packed close together under stress, and you had a ship; many such markers, many ships. He smiled. Few were as skilled as Jushol, and fewer still could fulfil the High Marshal's request. He was justly proud of his ability. The *Eternal Crusader* was no ordinary ship, and it demanded no ordinary Navigator.

Around the weak imprints of humanity's souls living out their short existences in real space, strong and brutish essences cut the stuff of the empyrean, single-minded as ocean predators, the collective manifestation of the orks' self-belief adding to the turbulence. In the shifting vistas cast up by the empyrean, Jushol caught glimpses of warrior giants clashing their fangs. A great battle was going on in the mortal realm, orks pitted against men, reflected by the phantoms in the warp.

‘I have it, Lord High Marshal,’ he said, his quiet words picked up by a servo-skull hovering close to his head. ‘Prepare for immediate real space translation.’

He relished the power. While in the empyrean, the *Eternal Crusader* was at his mercy. One push of his mind, and he could destroy every soul aboard the vessel. He could *damn* them. Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng was senior enough in his House to know some of the truth of the warp. He was no naive shipsteer, who believed the faces howling at him were mere fancy. He knew them for what they were – souls, and the things that hunted them.

They called to him, gesticulating lewdly, their faces cycling from plea to threat to promise like patterns on molten metal. ‘Release them to us, release them!’ they seemed to say. ‘Open up your box of morsels, and you shall be rewarded!’

Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng raised his aquila pendant to his lips, and kissed it.

‘The Emperor protects,’ he whispered.

The *Eternal Crusader* remained true upon its course, guided by the indomitability of his will. Beneath the faces were the eddies and currents of the raw warp stuff; it was there his attention needed to be. He shut the whispers out.

Focus, he thought. Focus. He willed himself to see through the nonsensical landscapes, evaluating the patterns of the corporeal universe that shared the same space, choosing the perfect spot. The High Marshal was a mighty warrior, but what was he without Jushol? Nothing. Nothing at all. Without Jushol, the plan would fail.

All the while, the Navigator held the ship in check. Its spirit was keen, desirous of throwing off its warp field and plunging into the cold night of true space where endless war awaited.

Focus, focus, he thought. Wait. Wait. There.

‘Now.’

By his thought alone, the warp engines howled. A rent opened to reveal mortal stars flickering behind hideous draperies of warp energy. The *Eternal Crusader* tore through the flimsy veil that divides reality from the truth, and plunged back into the void.

They went from one form of chaos to another. Battle raged in the heavens. The great bodies of ships, kilometres long, twinkled with weapons fire both received and released. This was not the stately dance of void war as it

should be waged, fleets so far apart they could not see one another, payloads taking hours if not days to arrive, but battle as up close and dirty as a Naval engagement on a backwards world, where wooden vessels exchange close-ranged cannon shot. Mighty Imperial capital ships, great castles of the skies, traded blows with the unlovely creations of the orks at distances measured in the mere hundreds of kilometres. Jushol was no great strategist, but he could see the Imperial trap for the hulk at the centre of the ork fleet, and the approaching flotilla that threatened to undo it all.

Moments later, *Majesty*, *Night's Vigil*, the *Virtue of Kings* and the *Light of Purity* burst through polychromatic coronas into the night, the smaller ships that made up their escort powering ahead to protect the flagship. Warp fumes curled away from them as Geller fields flared and winked out. A millisecond later, banks of void shields flicked into life all around them, cutting off the barrage that had already begun to come their way. Psychic impulses, not quite telepathy but not far removed from it, came from Jushol's cousins. Navigators of the other vessels, who informed him of their safe arrival in system.

From somewhere far away, Jushol heard an alarm ring. Not his concern. He sighed with satisfaction. All said, not a bad placement. He had put the Space Marine fleet directly between two ork battlegroups, much to the surprise of Navy and ork alike, he imagined gleefully.

His throne dais rotated smoothly, pistons hissing and bolts clunking as its transit carriage engaged. Before the Acies Horrens slid closed, his throne was already descending, multiple shields of metal and energy shutting over his head. He sat in his throne for the first time in days, closed his aching warp eye, undid his blindfold and retied it around his forehead. He opened his prosaic eyes. The quotidian colours of reality made him blink, and he shut his eyes again. He allowed the strain of staring into the warp to affect him. The pain of it was both physical and spiritual, not simply the tiredness of prolonged concentration. His muscles ached and his stomach was as nauseous as if he were suffering from rad-poisoning victim's. He closed his eyes and allowed the carriage to take him away, back to the armoured quarters of his palace, where he would recover, and wait out the engagement with his wines and his concubines.

Until the High Marshal called upon him again to part the veil of reality, his role was finished.

Upon the bridge of *His Will*, alarms rang. Augur servitors moaned with half-remembered panic.

‘Admiral!’ called *His Will*’s augur chief. ‘Incoming warp signature, opening up between us and Ork Flotilla Secundus.’

A patch of space highlighted on the oculus became bruised by unnatural energies. Vortices of light appeared and a massive ship rushed through them.

‘They’re friendly, sir!’ relayed the officer joyfully. ‘All broadcasting Imperial recognition cyphers. It’s the Black Templars!’

His Will grumbled under another series of punishing salvos. Parol grabbed at the rail around his command platform. ‘Excellent!’ he said excitedly.

‘More ships coming in, sir.’

Parol counted the vessels. Helbrecht had returned with more ships than he had departed with; that was good.

‘They’re moving in to engage with Ork Flotilla Secundus, my lord,’ said Quarist.

‘On primary display!’ demanded Parol.

‘Sir, the battle…’ said Quarist.

‘On primary display!’ he barked.

‘Primary display. Compliance,’ droned a bank of servitors.

The main oculus blinked out, replaced by a tactical placement map.

Parol squinted at the Black Templars fleet, his augmetic eye overlaying multiple informational light-screeds upon its position. He adjusted them.

‘Target, sir?’ asked Quarist.

‘Main oculus, return to battleview.’

‘Aye, sir!’ replied his augur officer. The true-pict view of the battle returned.

‘Ignore the *Malevolent Dread*. We shall leave that to our Adeptus Astartes friends. Maintain positions. All fleet, resume attack on the *Harbinger of Disaster*.’

‘Aye, sir!’

Orders were shouted into vox-tubes. Parol’s task force continued their bombardment of the *Harbinger*. It had limped away from them a little, but its engines had been shattered; it coasted on inertia alone. It could accelerate no more.

Helbrecht’s vessels crowded the other space hulks, cutting off their

interception of Battlefleet Armageddon. Fresh into the fight, they punished the ork ships mercilessly. Parol watched for a few more moments on a secondary holo table, until the *Harbinger* brought his attentions back to his own battle.

Jushol lay on his couch, watching the gyrations of a score of dancing girls. A steady stream of rare dishes were brought to his side, and he ate from them mechanically and without tasting them. He was rake thin, but he consumed enough food for a man four times his weight; the energy demands of navigating the warp were onerous. He was untroubled by the rocking of the ship, the rumble of its cannon and the distant shudder of impacts on the surface. Battle was not his concern. His slaves' dance was coming to a crescendo, their oiled, scantily clad bodies writhing against one another. Soon they would abandon their dance and entertain him in more direct ways.

I will regret losing this, he thought, when I become pair-bonded.

A buzz sounded from the corner, discordant with the music. Jushol raised himself to a sitting position and looked over. Nothing appeared amiss to his normal eyesight. His warp eye, sensitive to things beyond the mundane, saw just as well covered as it did uncovered, and through it he saw a glowing square, as light around an ill-fitting door.

Green lightning burst all over the room, earthing itself in flesh and liquid. His wine glass exploded, as did three of his dancing girls. The rest ran shrieking.

Jushol scrambled off his couch and was already heading for the door, his laspistol drawn in anger for the first time in his long career, when a crowd of orks teleported right into his sanctum.

The stink of them hit him first, a raw, animal reek that blasted out with the hot breeze of their arrival. They arrived firing and roaring, and did not stop.

'This is Jushol! Navigator Jushol!' he shouted at his servo-skull. 'I have orks in my inner chambers! I require aid!'

Five doors slid up in the walls, revealing concealed cybernetic guards. His House Triarii jolted to life and thumped into position from their concealed alcoves, their weapons limbs tracking targets perfectly as they walked forwards to form a protective arc between their master and the invading creatures. Bonded armsmen hared into the room from the main entrance,

responding to the alarms, rifles to their shoulders.

‘My lord, this way, this way!’ His master of arms pulled at Jushol’s sleeve. Jushol scrambled to his feet. Cerulean energy arced across the room from the arcane weapons of his Triarii, burning smoking holes in the chests of the orks.

There was a tremendous clatter of arms as the orks assailed the Triarii. Power fields crackled to life as Jushol’s cyborgs brought their close-combat weapons to bear. His armsmen took aim with their carbines, letting off a disciplined series of volleys.

Jushol knew that it would not be enough. He watched in horror as an ork wrenched out the weapons fittings of one of his augmetic warriors, dragging bloodied wires and metal-bound bones away. The construct gave a rattling metallic scream and fell dead, its operational lights going out. The ork stamped on the downed warrior, the grotesque rumbles coming from its mouth sounding uncomfortably like sadistic laughter.

Stumbling from the horrific scene, Jushol went after his House armsman, heading for the grav-drop escape chute hidden in his bedchamber next door.

They skidded on blood, Jushol going down. His man turned round to help him, his face a mask of controlled terror.

Jushol reached out for the armsman’s outstretched arms as they disappeared in a blast of fire, flesh gobbets and blood. An ork shouted out its delight, cast its pistol aside and came rushing towards Jushol, its axe over its head, mouth gaping obscenely wide to display a forest of yellow tusks and fangs.

Jushol raised his pistol and shot it three times rapidly in the head. He rolled out of the way as it crashed to the floor, sliding to a halt where he had been but a moment before.

His Triarii were overwhelmed. His armsmen were locked in a bitter, uneven struggle with green monsters pouring in through the entrance to his dining chamber.

Obviously, thought Jushol, they’ve teleported into more than one place.

Their armour was primitive, but their warty hides seemed impervious to the blows of his protectors. He watched as his last Triarii was bludgeoned to the ground and hacked to pieces. His armsmen rallied around him, a dwindling number of brave men buying Jushol seconds with their lives. The orks shrugged off many of their las-shots, only direct hits to the eyes putting

them down. They grabbed his men, hurling them out of the way as if they were woven of straw. One was shoved back into the Navigator, sending them both sprawling.

Jushol realised he was going to die. He had avoided thinking about death. Most of his kind did. Too many of them knew what awaited their souls on the other side of night.

Jushol scrambled to his feet. His way to the bedchamber and the escape chute was cut off. His men backed him into the corner. More Triarii came stamping into the room to fight the orks, but most of his armsmen were dead already. There were only six of them left when the welcome sound of bolter fire put thoughts of the afterlife from Jushol's mind.

Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein ran into the dining chamber, his sword buzzing with leashed lightning and a battle hymn on his lips. Six of the Chapter's elite were behind him. To Jushol's psychic senses, their ornate armour seemed to blaze with light as they marched in step into the room, blasting orks off their feet with shots from their bolt pistols. Mass reactives thudded into ork flesh at hypersonic velocities, detonating deep inside to tear chunks from their bodies. Incredibly, the orks did not all fall. Their robust frames contained the explosions, and some fought on, sporting wounds from weapons that would have smeared a man across the walls. The Black Templars let out a great shout and ran forwards to engage the enemy hand-to-hand. The din of battle intensified tenfold with the buzzing crack of disrupter fields smashing matter apart.

Gulvein sang out a challenge cant. An ork moved to intercept him. Gulvein cut him in half without breaking his stride. More orks fell. Their enthusiasm to engage the Praeses-Sword Brother evaporated as it become deadly apparent that he was not a challenging foe, but death incarnate.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' he roared. A giant ork, half as tall as the Space Marine again, rushed him. Gulvein deflected two of its blows with lightning parries, a third turning into a cutting riposte that sliced through the ork's armour and ribcage alike. The ork howled, stumbled backwards and collapsed to its knees. Gulvein struck off its head with his blade.

'So die all who would sully the halls of the *Eternal Crusader*!' He spat upon the dead xenos. 'No xenos has defiled Sigismund's shrine for centuries. None shall do so now!' He raised his sword and his men cheered.

A solitary bolt shot rang out. The quiet that followed was oddly disquieting

after the fury of battle. Jushol's chambers reeked of ork blood and their piggish odour. Fycellum smoke drifted, curling into eddies near atmospheric rejuvenator vents.

'Navigator Jushol Ja-Sha-Eng,' said Gulvein. He saluted the Navigator with his great sword to his forehead, then slid its bloodied blade uncleaned into its scabbard.

'You got here quickly, Brother Gulvein.'

'We had warning from the astropaths. You are fortunate we were close by dealing with another incursion when you were attacked.'

With a wail close to the screech of vox feedback, House Mistress Talifera stormed into the room, a coterie of terrified concubines behind her. They rushed to Jushol's side, weeping to see him so cruelly treated.

'This is a gross abuse of the treaty between the Chapter Astartes Black Templars and House Ju-Sha-Eng!' shouted Talifera. 'Your actions will be reported to the–'

Jushol held up a shaking hand, silencing his house mistress. Dust caked itself into his sweat, making him appear even more ghoulish than usual. He coughed, his lungs burning with the smoke of burned ork flesh, weapons discharge and fire suppressants.

'Your insistence on protocol is entirely admirable, house mistress, but I think, Talifera, under the circumstances we can allow the Sword Brother this one lapse, don't you?'

'Navigator,' she said, and turned her anger on the servants. Those who weren't dead were rousted out from their hiding places. They skirted the corpses of the giant aliens as if they would be tainted by contact then rushed, partly chased by the house mistress, back to their positions. Gingerly, his concubines helped Jushol to his feet.

Jushol holstered his laspistol and wiped away the blood trickling from his sodden blindfold. 'Make yourself useful and fetch me a fresh blindfold, Talifera. If it comes away, Gulvein, do not look into my eye.'

'Of course, holy Navigator,' said Gulvein, respectfully dropping his gaze.

The Black Templars veneration of him always put Jushol on edge; he attempted to push it aside with levity. 'To be the focus of our enemy's direct attention was… invigorating,' he said.

'The orks know of your value,' said Gulvein.

'So it appears,' said Jushol in a breezy way entirely at odds with the

hammering of his heart. He cleared his throat. ‘Seeing as this is my final tour, Sword Brother, I see no reason to spend it languishing in luxury here. Perhaps I might join you on the command deck for a change?’

Gulvein laughed gruffly. ‘Lord Navigator, I advise it.’

‘High Marshal, we have orks aboard, repeat, we have orks aboard the *Eternal Crusader*.’

‘Hold them! Destroy them, Ceonulf. By the Emperor, to battle!’

‘It will be done, my liege.’

The vox clicked off.

Helbrecht ducked back into the chamber. Weapons fire strobed through the dark corridors of the *Malevolent Dread.* The cacophony of shrapnel and ricochets against bulkheads was like the foundry of a mad god. Initiates covering the doors of the generator room were engaged in a fierce firefight with orks crowding outside. Soon the aliens would amass enough strength to rush the handful of Black Templars. Helbrecht turned to the Techmarine kneeling beside the heavy thermic charge teleported in with the boarding party.

‘How much longer, Brother Hexil?’ he shouted over the roar of weapons.

Techmarine Hexil continued making fine adjustments, but interrupted his prayers to reply. ‘The weapon’s spirit was offended by the rough treatment it suffered on arrival, High Marshal. If its containment loop is not realigned by the proper supplication, it will fail to consume itself and the reaction will not grow to the correct size for full devastation.’

‘Hurry, brother.’

Helbrecht was distracted by a sudden increase in the firing at one of the doors. Howls and yells announced an ork charge was imminent. He ran to meet the aliens’ rush. A huge ork leader crashed through the doorway and eviscerated an Initiate with a powered claw. Helbrecht stepped in, parrying its next blow away from another of his men, and countered with a swing perfectly timed to catch his foe off balance. The glittering energy field of the Sword of the High Marshals slashed through the ork’s neck. Its great head tumbled to the floor with a thump, and the ork fell, its arms waving spasmodically.

Helbrecht leapt forwards into the lesser orks behind, hacking and slashing with little finesse but horrible effectiveness. Limbs and heads flew apart. In

seconds the doorway was filled with twitching corpses. An Initiate came up with his flamer and the surviving orks were driven back down the corridor by a wall of flames.

'The charge is prepared!' called Brother Hexil.

Helbrecht switched vox-channels with a nerve impulse. 'High Marshal to the *Eternal Crusader*, immediate teleport recovery.'

The remaining Space Marines moved to the centre of the chamber and disappeared in a blinding flash of light and a clap of displaced air. Seconds later, the thermic charge blasted a new crater in the flank of the *Malevolent Dread.*

Helbrecht marched straight out of the teleportation chamber, barging aside serfs and artisans performing the rituals of sanctity. Still dirtied by battle, he strode onto the command deck in time to see the *Malevolent Dread* pulling away from the fight, its mismatched twin hulls pockmarked with fresh scars, a particularly large one still venting atmosphere from where the thermic charge had exploded.

'It flees before us, my liege,' said his shipmaster. 'Shall I order pursuit?'

'No. It is wounded, but we cannot destroy it and the *Paean*. Chase the *Malevolent Dread*, and both will escape,' said Helbrecht. 'Join the others. Finish the *Paean*.' He pointed to the oculus, where holograms showed a miniature light sculpture of the other hulk being pummelled by the remainder of the Black Templars fleet. 'As soon as it dies, engage main drive and make all haste directly to Armageddon. Do not hide our destination. I want the *Malevolent Dread* to thirst for vengeance. We have offended its pride, and it will come to us. Ricard, Amalrich, you are to prepare your men for immediate deployment upon Armageddon. The Season of Fire is over, the Season of Shadows is here and you may land in relative safety. Once we have dropped you onto the surface, we shall spring our final trap for the *Malevolent Dread*. We shall make it pay for the destruction of Hades Hive. We shall make it pay for its tainting of the *Eternal Crusader.'*

A febrile light was on him, and none would dare argue with him.

His Will's augurs registered the massive spikes of teleport energies gathering in the Black Templars fleet. An explosion sent a pillar of flame from the *Malevolent Dread*. Like a wounded animal, it lumbered away from

its persecutors. The *Eternal Crusader* turned its attentions to the *Paean to Discontent*.

Time passed. All the while, the Black Templars kept up their bombardment of the *Paean.* Finally, the *Eternal Crusader* finished its laborious repositioning and opened fire.

‘Steady, men!’ Parol shouted, anticipating with perfect accuracy what was about to occur.

Parol laughed in relief as the *Paean to Discontent* burst apart. The cheers of his men were muted, occupied as they were with their own tasks.

‘Well done, High Marshal, well done. And now, my men, intensify fire!’ he barked. ‘Destroy! I will not have the Space Marines show me up, do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir!’

The shaking and rumbling of *His Will* increased as it hurled thousands of rounds of high-explosive shells and simple mass-blocks at the *Harbinger of Disaster* from its extensive gundecks. They had the *Harbinger of Disaster* trapped. The last of its cruiser escorts were attempting to flee. Bright flashes marked their deaths as swift destroyer groups chased them down and caught them in interlocking torpedo spreads.

Parol’s cruisers and battleships pounded relentlessly at the ork hulk, but it would not yield. The hulk was massive, three times bigger than *His Will*, though most of it was stone and ablative layers of dirty cosmic ice. Chunks of it came away in fiery blasts, knocked free with such force they had to be shot down by Imperial interceptors and flak cannons before they slammed into *His Will*.

Parol watched, and he waited, and then when he judged the moment right, he spoke. ‘All fleet,’ he ordered. ‘Withdraw to safe distance. Maintain fire!’

His Will rumbled loudly, the massive engines at the rear sending powerful tremors the length of the ship. It groaned as it nosed upwards away from the hulk. All around the ork ship, the rest of the fleet was doing the same.

‘Keep your shields up, captains. Any vessel with limited shield capacity fall back immediately. Anti-munitions cannons to full alert. Interceptors, prepare for debris. Escort squadrons, withdraw immediately. Stand by…’

‘I see no sign the hulk is ready to explode, admiral,’ said Quarist.

‘And that is why I keep you around, flag officer, so that I can constantly be proved correct. Observe.’ Parol gestured at the oculus

Without warning, the *Harbinger of Disaster* died. There was no great display of fire and fury; it simply split down the middle like an opened seed pod, spilling a million grains of matter into space. Most of which, Parol thought with satisfaction, were orks. Flash-frozen gasses surrounded the wreck in a shimmering bloom of ice.

'And there you have it, Quarist,' said Parol.

'Yes sir. All ships, break off! Break off! Victory is ours,' said Quarist.

Polite clapping resounded around the command deck. Parol bowed graciously. 'Thank you. Someone get me a drink. And hail High Marshal Helbrecht before he can go dashing off again. I wish to welcome him back,' he said. 'And by that, Quarist,' he added as an aside to his aide, 'I mean ask him where by the Emperor's Throne he's been these last months.'

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MALEVOLENT DREAD

From the underside of the *Eternal Crusader*, two dozen drop pods rushed towards Armageddon, Thunderhawks following. A cordon of destroyer squadrons and light cruisers kept the enemy at bay. Two minutes later, after the *Eternal Crusader* had progressed three hundred kilometres further around the world, and a similar number of craft burst out in a second drop. Glinting in the star's unfiltered light, they fell fast, accelerated by bursts of flame stabbing from their upper surfaces. They were unassuming teardrops of metal, each carrying a cargo of death – Marshal Ricard's men going down to war upon the surface.

'Ash Waste Crusade fighting companies one and two away, my liege. Ash Crusade away!' relayed the embarkation deck command liaison.

'All craft have attained atmospheric insertion, my lord. We may begin withdrawal,' spoke the Master of Landings, an Initiate this one.

'Praise be!' shouted the Master of Sanctity. A chorus of thrall-monks sang it back at him.

'May the Emperor bless them and guide them,' said Helbrecht. 'How is our other task?'

'Long-range augur has captured the energy signature of the *Malevolent Dread*, my liege,' said a senior auspex officer. 'It has taken the bait.'

'What other ships of the greenskins are in close range?'

'Three battlegroups, my liege. Adeptus Astartes strike force one is engaging with two of those, fifty thousand kilometres out. *Night's Vigil* reports successful rendezvous and is bolstering the Sons of Guilliman and Silver Skulls interdiction groups. The third approaches from the nightside.

Admiral Parol's Battlegroup, Gloriana, is moving to intercept. Further ork forces are approaching, but are at best estimate seven hours away from our position. The *Virtue of Kings* has withdrawn and is responding to requests for assistance from the Celebrants and Mortifactors combined forces near Chosin.'

'And the *Malevolent Dread*?'

'Three hours, my liege. It will find us isolated and apparently vulnerable.'

'Send back our escort group to shadow the *Virtue of Kings*. Have the *Light of Purity* maintain position in the debris field. Whatever green tyrant rules aboard the *Malevolent Dread* has set his eyes on Sigismund's vessel, and I want this ship to remain too tempting a prize to ignore. I will depart for the *Light of Purity* in three minutes to prepare our boarding parties. Brothers, that I have asked the *Eternal Crusader* to run will have kindled the flames of anger in your hearts. Do not see our feint as shameful – it is the surest path to victory. Today, the *Malevolent Dread* will die. You know your orders. Now, to your stations.'

'It shall be done, my liege,' said Gulvein.

The group of Sword Brethren and Initiates bowed their heads and left the command dais.

'Now for ruin, and the pulling of this thorn from our side,' said Helbrecht to Theoderic. He took a final look around the command deck of his flagship. Well pleased by what he saw there, he departed, heading for the embarkation decks and his own transport.

Three hours passed.

Five thousand kilometres away, a subgroup of Battlefleet Armageddon were efficiently dismembering a shoal of ork cruisers.

Through the glare of Armageddon's atmospheric albedo, Parol watched the *Eternal Crusader* turning away from the approaching *Malevolent Dread*, giving all appearance of flight. Encouraged by this apparent display of cowardice, the ork craft's engines burned brighter, sending it quickly towards its prey.

Parol kept half an eye on this other engagement. The *Eternal Crusader* was nimble for its size, and was slipping away; engines pointing towards Armageddon, prow pointing up away from the planet's axis, it pushed out from the system's ecliptic plane. The *Malevolent Dread* was closing fast,

coming at the battle-barge abeam as it travelled parallel to Armageddon's orbital track. Primitive engines bolted to the surface of the two ships that comprised the hulk burned with dirty yellow fire. The *Malevolent Dread*'s blunt-fronted prow lofted 'upwards' – Parol found it useful to think of any gravity well in his area of battle as 'down'. In a slow parabola, the ship curved from its current heading, meaning to intercept the *Eternal Crusader* closely when they intersected, perhaps even ram her. An elegant move, he mused. Mathematics invested even the ships of orks with grace.

'Forty-seven cruisers and another hulk are moving to attack the Black Templars fleet, my lord,' reported an augur officer.

'Shall we engage, sir?' asked Quarist.

'Sector?' asked Parol.

'Thirty, my lord. Coming in at twelve thousand kilometres per hour, thirty-seven degrees toward rotational plane, widespread. No formation, sir.

'Hold steady. I'll not commit until the orks have taken the bait,' said Parol. 'Finish this rabble.'

There was little need for Parol to direct his battlegroup in smashing the remaining ork cruisers, and so he watched the hulk until it passed over the debris field cluttering Armageddon's orbit; the shattered hulls and fragments of the many vessels destroyed in months of fighting formed a shining, ragged halo about the world. Once this war was done, it would take months of expensive effort to render Armageddon's near-space safe for shipping. For the moment, it provided the perfect cover for the *Light of Purity*. The battle-barge floated like any other giant piece of junk, engines dark. There was always a risk in this kind of venture; a clever ork might scan the vessel and note that its reactor was fully functional. Parol snorted at the thought. There were terrifyingly intelligent orks, of that there was no doubt; probably one of them was doing exactly that, right now. But what they lacked was organisation – if such an ork existed, he would not be heeded, and there was no overcoming that.

The *Malevolent Dread* passed over the *Light of Purity*. Focused on exchanging long-range fire with the retreating *Eternal Crusader* – all of which, being aimed directly at the battle-barge rather than where it would be, missed – it did not react when the other battle-barge's engines flared, sending it quickly up to intercept the hulk.

With one devastating close-range salvo, the *Light of Purity* collapsed

layers of power fields in strobes of sheet-lightning flashes. The hulk was wide open to assault.

Parol's oculus and augur officers relayed teleport energy surges from the *Light of Purity*. Two minutes passed, then three. The hulk was firing at the *Light of Purity*, and this time it had a bead on its target, but the hulk, unprotected by shields, was taking the worst of it. Meanwhile, the *Eternal Crusader* was altering its heading to come about in a long arc. Turning a ship of that mass was no trivial matter, but within a few hours it would be upon the *Malevolent Dread*, trapping it between itself and its sister.

When four minutes had passed, the silvery streaks of assault rams and boarding torpedoes crossed the space between the *Light of Purity* and the *Malevolent Dread*. Anti-attack-craft fire streamed towards them, but all but two of the assault craft made it through to converge on three distinct points.

'Helbrecht has sprung his trap,' said Parol. 'Let us give him enough time to see it to success. Fleet, new heading. Prepare our second interception of the day.' He began ordering the complex dance of spacecraft combat.

The assault ram banged as it penetrated the already weakened section of the hulk wall, vibrating fit to burst as its twin prows scraped against metal. The doors slammed down. Helbrecht was first out, his men following him into a large, open area about twenty metres across, the same in height and width. Three winding corridors led off opposite the ram's breach point. Perhaps it had once been a cargo loading bay, but the ship that made up this half of the hulk was of unknown xenos make and therefore Helbrecht could only hazard a guess what the space had been intended for. The floor was tilted at an angle to the pull of artificial gravity. The walls bore the signs of the ship's original impact with the second vessel comprising the agglomeration, being wrinkled with collision stress. The smooth, alien contours of the ship had been further defaced by the orks' 'improvements'. Huge, badly cut girders braced the ceiling randomly; pointless reinforcement had been riveted in ugly patchwork all over parts of it, leaving other stretches untouched. Ork filth coated the floors, and ork graffiti was daubed on the walls. Moisture dripped freely from the filthy roof. There was little illumination, and it stank.

Air howled through the breach around the ram's front as the hulk depressurised, a distant moan through Helbrecht's auto-senses. Dead orks

were scattered everywhere. The snap of gunfire came from down all three corridors, its source masked by the decompression gale. Sword Brethren Terminators had teleported in and cleared the landing zone of orks, and now held the perimeter for the crusaders' landing.

A second boom heralded the arrival of a boarding torpedo, followed by a second. The inner hull glowed as their melta-drills burned their way inside. Their grub-like noses of molten metal ran onto the floor and pushed their way into the vessel. The metal hadn't cooled before the doors gaped wide and more Black Templars deployed.

'Castellan Ceonulf, report,' Helbrecht voxed.

'We have purged many xenos, my liege. More are inbound. We hold the perimeter, but tenuously,' Ceonulf replied.

'Squads five, nine and four, reinforce Terminator boarding parties. Squad six, with me,' ordered Helbrecht. His Initiates thundered out in good order, dispersing down the corridors to join the Sword Brethren teleport attack parties.

'Void Crusade group two reporting safe breaching,' said Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein.

'Void Crusade group three aboard,' came Chaplain Theoderic's voice.

'Two ships lost, my liege. Three squads. Anyone else take a hit?' said Gulvein.

'No,' said Theoderic. 'We are all aboard. Praise be for our safe delivery.'

'Praise be,' they all said.

Gunfire rattled over Gulvein's vox-feed. 'Atmospheric pressure has stabilised here. I've multiple hostiles.'

'I too,' said Theoderic.

'To your targets, knights,' said Helbrecht. 'With the Emperor's blessing, I shall see you at the final objective. Praise be.'

'Praise be,' his subordinates replied.

In the meantime, Helbrecht's men had debarked and spread out. Last was Champion Vosper. He walked out of one of the boarding torpedoes and drew his sword. The hesitant neophyte of a few days before had gone, replaced by a graceful killer.

'Where does the Emperor guide you, Champion?' asked Helbrecht.

'This way.' Vosper's voice had changed; it was quiet, imbued with divine power. Vosper pointed his sword down the middle of the three tunnels

branching out from the breaching site.

Helbrecht unswathed the Sword of the High Marshals. ‘I shall go with you. Where the Champion walks, there the fighting is thickest.’

‘Praise be!’ his men shouted.

Helbrecht and Vosper battled hard against an endless horde of howling xenos. They killed and killed, until the ground was slick with ork blood and the ship reeked like an abattoir. The fabled swords of the Black Templars rose and fell together, each swing slaying another of the creatures. Pace by pace, Helbrecht had his men push their way deeper into the hulk.

The orks were fierce. Black Templar zeal was matched by unthinking ork ferocity. By the time Helbrecht’s group had reached its first objective – an erratic ork power source feeding the ship’s grav generators – three of the nine Terminator-clad Sword Brethren had been killed or incapacitated, and seven of the fifty Initiates Helbrecht had brought aboard would fight no more. His group’s Apothecary was all too busy harvesting gene-seed, his reductor bloody. Many others had sustained wounds; Helbrecht himself sported three, the rents in his armour closed up by interlayer sealant foam and his own fast-clotting blood.

More and more orks were swarming towards them. Gulvein and Theoderic reported mounting casualties as groups separated from the strike forces to pursue multiple objectives. The further they went in, the less sense the hulk’s interior made. Hand-to-hand fighting became the norm as secure fire lanes were abandoned in the chaotic layout of the alien ship, and more deaths came as a result.

It took half an hour of hard fighting before Helbrecht’s group were sufficiently clear of their first thermal charge to detonate it. Helbrecht interrupted his battle hymn to order his men to engage their boot maglocks. A thunderclap of overpressure blasted up the corridor, ripping at the robes and oath papers of the Space Marines, followed by the hollow, whistling howl of fire instantaneously consuming all the oxygen available to it.

‘Gravity generatorium disabled,’ reported Techmarine Hexil.

‘Praise be!’ roared Helbrecht.

The going became easier. The orks were severely disadvantaged by the lack of artificial gravity. After the first group were sent bouncing from the walls by their guns’ recoil to be easily picked off by bolter fire, they ceased

coming, resorting to a variety of equally unsuccessful tactics – strange creatures strapped up with explosives, or snivelling examples of their slave races walking hand over hand down the rough wall surfaces carrying bombs. Neither of these worked, and so the orks resorted to throwing grenades down the corridors, but the twisting nature of the xenos' ship made this difficult, and when the grenades did explode among the Space Marines, their explosives were insufficiently powerful to break through Adeptus Astartes battleplate.

These attacks, too, ceased, when Theoderic's group successfully blasted a series of holes in the hull, venting much of this section's atmosphere.

'Orks are tough, brother, but they need air to breathe,' said the Chaplain with grim delight. 'The Emperor guides us. Praise be.'

Each group battled onwards, detonating key parts of the ship's systems. Occasionally, they were frustrated by multiple redundancies, but these had been randomly applied by the orks' mechanicians. What would have been critical systems aboard an Imperial ship often proved to have no backup at all, whereas items of secondary interest to the Space Marines might have several. Other thermic charges were rigged for later remote detonation, part of the chain reaction that would tear the *Malevolent Dread* in two once the Space Marines had withdrawn to the *Light of Purity*.

Gulvein's group fared worse than the other two. Under strength, they struggled to beat back the assailing orks. One subgroup was cut off, finding itself fighting a desperate defence in a cavernous room full of junk. Their joyful death hymns provided inspiration for their brothers as they pushed on.

Three hours in, Helbrecht's group reached the end of the final corridor. Brother Hexil reached out his hand to lightly touch the wall.

'This is the skin of the ship, my liege,' said the Techmarine.

Helbrecht leaned on his sword a moment. His body buzzed with combat stimulants and counterfatigue drugs. His muscles were tired, but when his Apothecary attempted to examine his wounds, Helbrecht pushed him back and stood tall.

'Leave me!' he snapped. 'On the other side lies our final objective. Blow it wide, brothers, and let us bring the fury of the Emperor down on these alien savages!'

Helbrecht's command squad went through first, protecting the High Marshal as he emerged into the vast space between the two starships that made up the *Malevolent Dread*. It was a metal cave many hundreds of metres high, the walls a mess of crevices and room-caves where the hull fabric had given way. The ship opposite Helbrecht was noticeably of human make, an early Imperial ship approaching the *Eternal Crusader* in age. The cavern floor had been planed off into a number of levels by platforms and catwalks; similar structures had been bolted to the sides of each ship.

All were crawling with orks. Many hundreds more were flooding in from the ship opposite.

'There,' pointed Helbrecht to a part of the cave that appeared like any other, 'that is where the last charge must go.'

His men deployed in a line, Terminators and Helbrecht's command squad at the centre. Nearby, Theoderic's group emerged also, the edges of his line joining with Helbrecht's. The Black Templars silently waited until their lines were ready, unconcerned by the sea of orks bounding up the cavern's floor towards them. They marched in perfect unison to the bomb site, and halted while Brother Hexil directed his slaves to position the bomb.

'Forward!' screamed Helbrecht. 'No remorse! No pity! No fear!'

Gunfire erupted all along the Black Templars battlefront, a withering hail of bolter fire that dropped hundreds of orks like rows of reaped corn. Still they came charging onwards. Behind Helbrecht, Hexil and his servitors prepared their last thermic charge. Helbrecht roared orders, directing the fire of his knights to weak spots on the ork line one moment, switching them to thin out stronger groups the next. The Black Templars marched forwards in time to their guns, singing their doom-laden songs of devotion to the Emperor. The orks came nearer and nearer, until they broke upon the Black Templars in a great green wave. A mob of huge orks in thick powered armour smashed into the centre of the conjoined fighting companies with an almighty crack, bowing it back. Against the odds, the line held, and the Black Templars sang louder as they unhitched their chainswords.

'Vosper! Vosper!' shouted Helbrecht, seeking out the Champion of the Emperor. The Champion was walking towards a part of the line that seemed no worse and no better than any other. Helbrecht cast a wary glance at the leader orks and saw one felled by a flaring burst of the Master of Sanctity's crozius. That part was holding, for now.

‘This way,’ replied Vosper’s voice, a slow and somnolent as that of a dreamer. ‘This way my doom lies.’

Helbrecht muttered a quick prayer. Putting his trust in the Emperor, he followed Vosper into the press of orks.

There was nothing dreamlike about Vosper in combat. He fought with unsurpassed skill, the mark of a warrior of many centuries, not a barely trained neophyte. Body parts flew high as he carved a bloody path forwards. Helbrecht followed, his command squad behind him, stopping the sea of orks closing around the Champion.

‘High Marshal, we are ready to deploy the device,’ Hexil informed him.

‘How long?’

‘Four minutes, no more.’

Helbrecht grunted as he forced his ancient weapon through an ork’s chest-plate, the banging of the power field deafening as it shattered matter at the atomic level deafening. The sounds of battle retreated as his auto-senses dampened the din.

‘Gulvein, what is your status?’

‘Poor, my liege – we cannot break through the orks to join with you.’

‘We will soon be done here. Fall back, if you can. Make for the transports.’ He was panting now, fully occupied by the efforts of fighting and of directing his men. ‘*Light of Purity*.’

‘High Marshal?’

‘Inform the Master of Translocation to prepare the teleport bays. Multiple signal locks required.’

‘Yes, my liege. You are aware that we will struggle with so many. The plan was to return via the transports.’

‘Plans change. The *Eternal Crusader*?’

Silence as his operations commander conferred with someone Helbrecht could not hear.

‘The *Eternal Crusader* is out of teleport range, my liege, and will be for another quarter hour.’

‘Very well. Tell the transports to wait to the last moment, then cast off. See to it that as many of our brothers are saved as can be. But nothing, I repeat nothing, is too high a price to pay for this victory.’

‘As you will it, my liege.’

Helbrecht cut his vox-channel and screamed, a howl of fanatical hatred. If

an ork stepped before him, it died. Invigorated by his dauntless ferocity, the Black Templars line pushed forwards, drawn on by their champions.

So it went – the orks were pushed back to the midway point between the two ships, the Black Templars so successful that their line bent like a drawn bow, so much they were in danger of exposing their flanks.

Then the orks parted, and a new threat emerged: the ork king of the hulk.

It was an enormous monster, the biggest ork Helbrecht had ever seen. In height, it was taller than two lesser orks, and massed as much as five. Its head was the size of Helbrecht's torso and a tall iron totem depicting a leering ork rose from its back, decorated with human skulls and twists of hair.

Unlike so many orks Helbrecht had recently seen, the king had no clanking warsuit, only thick plates threaded onto leather straps to protect it. Consequently, it moved with terrifying speed. It came bursting through the press of its fellows, pushing them over and indiscriminately slaughtering them to get at the foe. Hurling two of its own warriors aside, the king reached the front of the line. It slammed into an Initiate, sending him down onto the heaped dead. A blow from its chainaxe, a huge, crudely made thing as big as Helbrecht, ended the Initiate Black Templar's life. Roaring with laughter, the ork king laid about it, hewing apart the battle-brothers as easily as if they were made of glass. Another brother died, then a third, and a fourth. The ork's fist shattered helmets, and its chainaxe parted limbs from their bodies. It strode towards the Champion, seeing him as a worthy enemy.

The king's axe could not break the black sword. The ork's weapon stopped dead as Vosper intercepted its blow, the chainaxe held in place by the sacred blade, its teeth churning sparks from black solarite.

With an oath to the Emperor, Vosper twisted and disengaged, throwing the ork's axe wide and pressing home his attack with a deadly overhead strike.

The warboss caught the attack, and the next, but Vosper was unstoppable, driving the towering beast back, its minions spreading away from this embodiment of the Emperor's wrath until a circle had formed around the combatants. The Black Templars took advantage of the orks' cowardice to gun down many, but always there was a quiet prayer on their lips, willing the Champion to victory.

The ork king slipped on the guts of a fallen ork warrior, going down.

Vosper delivered the final blow without hesitation, the black sword whistling down with unstoppable power.

The warboss caught the blow on the haft of its axe. The weapon was cloven in two, the heavy head spinning off into the press of orks. The black sword's tip continued downwards, scraping against the ork king's armour. Robbed of much of its power, it only wounded the creature. It did not kill.

Bellowing with primal rage at this humiliation, the ork launched itself from the floor at Vosper, knocking him off balance. It drew another axe from its belt to hammer over and again at the Champion. Vosper stumbled backwards. The ork shoulder barged him, knocking the black sword back. With a triumphant roar, the greenskin swung his axe at Vosper's head, splitting helmet and skull.

The black sword dropped from his lifeless grip. Vosper fell. A moan of despair went up from the Space Marines to see the Champion fall. They faltered, if only for an instant, but it was enough.

The orks surged forwards. Helbrecht bellowed and waded into them, slashing and slaying. But the press of thick green arms was too much, and he was pulled down to the ground; only his oath-lanyard prevented the loss of Sigismund's sword.

Huge fists grabbed his wrists and ankles. He jerked his limbs, trying to wrench them free. Massively fanged jaws snapped at his helmet, coating his eye-lenses in drool. Then the orks drew back, and he was pulled tight.

A big ork stepped forwards, hefting a massive axe. It raised the weapon over its head and swung hard, burying it in Helbrecht's chest-plate. Helbrecht roared as his reinforced ribcage cracked, the pain overwhelming him before his superhuman body adjusted. The ork snarled, tugging to free its axe so it might finish the High Marshal. The pain was unbearable.

The ork gripped the axe haft and leered at him, preparing to yank hard. Helbrecht gritted his teeth, but the pain never came. The ork disappeared in a blast of superheated steam.

Bolt-rounds felled a broad swathe of orks all around Helbrecht. Chainswords flashed. A meltagun vapourised another ork. The grips Helbrecht's limbs were released as his command squad drove the orks away from him. Hands grabbed him under his armpits. Apothecary Vargen looked down at him.

'Perhaps this time you will not push me away, my liege.'

Helbrecht grasped his Apothecary's forearm. His hand would not grip; he was weak. His limbs grew cold. 'Perhaps not.'

'My liege! We are falling! We cannot hold them!' shouted Theoderic.

'Hexil…' Helbrecht said groggily.

'One minute.' Hexil paused. 'Leave us here. I will see the job through to the end, as is my sacred duty.'

Helbrecht struggled up on shaking legs. The Black Templars line was in pieces. His men had been broken up into small knots, fighting back to back, small islands of black in a sea of green.

'Hexil!'

'It is not ready, my liege! Retreat, Brother Helbrecht. My brothers in arms protect me. They will see my task is completed. Pray for me, brother. Tell the Emperor of my loyalty.'

Helbrecht opened a vox-channel to the *Light of Purity* with a thought.

'Activate teleport. All units. Get us out of here.'

His final view of the hulk interior was bright light, oily wisps of smoke curling up from the centre as his brothers were spirited away and the crashing rage of the orks at the disappearance of their foes.

Bright light. The clap of displaced air. Helbrecht fell forwards into the dimness of the teleport chamber, colliding with hissing pipes. The axe buried in his chest jarred in his ribcage, bringing forth an unmoderated roar of pain. Frantic hands beat at the chamber door in response to his cries. Cleansing vapours gushed over him and he reeled. The door seal whispered, and the door clanked aside. Strong hands dragged him from the teleport pod, supporting him as he rolled out.

'Send word to the apothecarion!' shouted Brother-Apothecary Vargen. 'The High Marshal is injured! Thralls! Bring a bier!'

Cries went up. 'The High Marshal! The High Marshal is wounded!'

Men and knights pulled at him, dragging him onto the bier. Helbrecht no longer had the strength to stand.

'Destroy the hulk,' said Helbrecht, rasping horribly through his grille, his throat congested with blood. The axe was buried deep in his sternum. The pain was overcoming the best efforts of his pharmocopeia and body.

'My liege!' protested the Master of Translocation, a high-ranking forge-thrall. 'There are dozens of brothers unaccounted for and at this moment we

cannot retrieve them because our systems have overloaded and we have multiple teleport failures! Give me minutes, my liege, and they will be saved. I beg you!'

Hexil's voice came to him, blurred by static. 'The orks are disabling the devices, my liege.' Bolters cracked in the background. Battle hymns competed with the howl of orks. 'We must do this now or our deaths will be in vain.'

How many were going to die? thought Helbrecht. How many?

Faith. The Emperor ordained this. It could not be any other way. It cannot be wrong. I cannot be wrong. I am the chosen of the God-Emperor of Man.

'Destroy the hulk,' he said through gritted teeth. Blood bubbled up from his broken innards, running down his chin and pooling in his helmet. 'Fidelis, Brother Hexil. Your memory will be honoured.'

'Order received,' responded Brother Hexil dispassionately. 'For the Emperor. For the Omnissiah. Praise be. No pity! No remorse! No fear!' he shouted, and triggered the thermic charges.

The *Malevolent Dread* died spectacularly. A series of internal explosions blasted out from strategic junctures, wrenching apart the rough joining of the two ships. They split, finally free from one another after their millennia-long embrace, shedding fire and detritus that glittered outwards in an ever-expanding ball. The explosion pushed the alien half of the hulk straight into Armageddon's grasp, where days later it would fall from the sky in fiery ruin. The Imperial half was jolted away from the planet, debris trails sparkling behind it.

Helbrecht saw none of this. The death of the hulk was coolly relayed to him against a background of lamentation.

The *Malevolent Dread* was destroyed, but at great cost. With it one hundred and seven Black Templars, living and dead, were annihilated.

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CHAPTER NINE

AFTERMATH

Helbrecht watched the war-strewn void from his sanctum. A puckered scar ran at a slight diagonal up the centre of his chest, a reminder of the wound he had taken a year ago. Ten Terran months had passed since the *Malevolent Dread* had been destroyed; a blow against his Chapter, and one that effectively ended the Black Templars solo efforts against the ork fleet. Grievous to them, but to the orks also; in the months following, many more hulks had been destroyed by the combined actions of the Adeptus Astartes and Imperial Navy.

The war's second Season of Fire wracked Armageddon, bringing another cessation of hostilities. The volcanoes belching out their plumes of ash were hidden beneath palls of their own ejecta, the choking storms they engendered sweeping around the ravaged world like stirred-up silt muddies water.

The orb of detritus around the planet was thicker than it had been. Not one of Armageddon's orbital stations or satellites was intact. The shattered hulls of dozens of Imperial ships drifted there, along with hundreds of wrecked ork vessels too. Every night, the sky glowed with stars falling from this new constellation, streaking the darkness with smoke and fire. These war meteors were a blessing in their way, a reminder to those below that the war above was won, even though they brought more misery when they hit the ground.

The door spoke.

'The Most Honoured Commissar Sebastian Yarrick requests humbly to enter into my liege's chambers,' said the servitor. 'Accept, deny?'

‘I am expecting him. Allow him entry.’

Helbrecht watched the door open. The cadaverous commissar came within. Gaunt before, he had aged more than a year since they had last met, his face pale and dry beneath his vast commissar’s cap and high collars. He wore his armour, from which no amount of polish could remove the scratches, and his famous ork-claw prosthetic, cut from the monster that had taken his original arm during the first ork invasion.

‘High Marshal,’ said Yarrick. A strong, commanding voice still, issuing though from age-puckered lips blued with poor circulation. ‘You are admiring Armageddon’s new night sky? The people of the system thank you for its creation.’

Helbrecht made a little noise in his throat, part way between acknowledgement and dismissal.

‘They should thank me, and every Black Templar. I have lost nearly five hundred Initiates fighting here,’ said Helbrecht.

‘And yet you have victory,’ said Yarrick.

‘I do,’ said Helbrecht approvingly. ‘A worthy one at that, bought though it was with half the number of my Chapter. Two most holy Champions of the Emperor died here, and still the price was not too high.’

‘You are not alone,’ said Yarrick. ‘Several other Chapters report similar losses.’

‘And worse besides, I am a warrior of faith, commissar. The Emperor ordained this, and so it must be.’

‘You believe the Emperor to have a plan?’

‘You do not?’

Yarrick smiled grimly.

‘We do,’ continued Helbrecht. ‘The Emperor is all seeing, all knowing. This war here must form part of His intentions.’

‘You think so? This carnage, so many dead, so many members of the Adeptus Astartes gone. It is unprecedented,’ said Yarrick.

‘We live in unprecedented times, commissar,’ said Helbrecht. ‘This war is cataclysmic, but there are worse being fought across the galaxy as we speak.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Yarrick, turning to the High Marshal. ‘You are a man after my own heart, High Marshal Helbrecht. Now more than ever, the Imperium demands sacrifice. And your order lives on to fight another day. Others will

not. The Celestial Lions, I hear, have been almost destroyed.'

'Yes,' said Helbrecht. 'My Reclusiarch, Grimaldus, has requested leave to investigate this tragedy. The Celestial Lions are the sons of Dorn, as are we. It is our duty to help them, as it was our duty to help you. But no price is too high to pay for victory.'

'You are leaving,' said Yarrick.

Helbrecht nodded. 'The Third War for Armageddon is done.'

Yarrick laughed, a rattling dry chuckle. 'The war here will never be done. It will be the work of generations to purge the system, and still the orks come.'

'True. But our part in it is over. I declare this crusade a success. The ork fleet is shattered. Their advances on the surface have been arrested. The Great Beast has fled the system. I swore an oath to kill him myself. The remnants of Amalrich's fighting company will stay, as will the *Virtue of Kings*, but I will not. Last night, I renewed my oath in the Temple of Dorn before the sarcophagus of our founder, my brothers as witnesses. In three days we will depart. I will hunt him down wherever he might be, and by Sigismund's sword he will die.' He growled this last. 'I said the war is done, but a new task beckons, a new chapter in the annals of the Endless Crusade.'

'You know what I have come to ask.'

The two warriors, an ageless giant and a broken old man living on borrowed time, looked through the windows of the *Eternal Crusader*, past the glint of the orbital debris field to the stars shining beyond.

'I do. You wish to do what any follower of the Emperor would wish. You wish what *I* wish. You would see Ghazghkull dead.'

'I am an old man, High Marshal – very old, by the standards of mere mortals. I am resigned to never retiring. I could, I am sure, go back to my garden and my writing with all honours, and not look back.' His mouth quirked wryly. 'But I tried that before, and it did not suit me. I am going to die. Not long now, I think. When I do, I want to know that at least one threat to our embattled Imperium has been removed, and if I cannot be there when it happens, I want to travel with the warrior who I know can see it through to the end.'

Helbrecht's stony face displayed some emotion for once: a hint of understanding. He looked down at the Old Man of Armageddon.

‘It will be an honour to host you, commissar. You and your men will be welcome aboard the *Eternal Crusader* for as long as our mission takes. I ask of you only one thing.’

‘And that would be?’

‘When the moment comes to slay the Great Beast, stay out of my way.’

‘As you wish, High Marshal,’ said the old man.

They stayed unspeaking together for a while, lost in their singular thoughts yet united by common purpose.

Under their feet the *Eternal Crusader* bustled with activity as the new crusade was prepared.

Lost amid all the preparations for departure, amid the clanking of foundries, the roar and buzz of the myriad machine processes required to keep the ship and its inhabitants alive, the chanting of monks, the rumble of the reactor and its subsidiaries, the comings and goings of lesser craft, the efforts of repair crews to heal the riven hull and a million more sources of noise, was a tremor of unalloyed, vicious pleasure.

The *Eternal Crusader* looked forward to a new war.

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THE GLORIOUS TOMB

GUY HALEY

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There has been a time of nothing. How long, I do not know. I know nothing when I sleep. There are no dreams, no sensation.

My first indication that my slumber is done is that I am cold and in pain. Praise be to the Emperor, for the pain and cold tell me that I live, that soon I will serve Him again from beyond the doors of death. Praise be! Invictus Potens is active, my glorious tomb awakens!

The cold will be fleeting. The pain is with me always.

A blinking cursor appears in my mind's eye. It is all I can see. Invictus Potens's eyes are inactive, and my own have not seen anything for five hundred years.

Words scroll across my implanted viewplate.

Cogitators alpha, beta, gamma, active. Life support systems awakened. He that giveth life, holdeth life. Let His grip be firm. Logos memorandum operational. Blessed are the recollections of the past, for in them are the seeds of tomorrow's victories.

Invictus Potens has a mind of his own, a bestial thing that meshes with mine. The logos awakens along with the logic engines that house his spirit. It will record my mental state along with his. My thoughts. These thoughts.

Initiate testing sequence.

There is a pause.

Testing sequence initiated. Engaging engine. Fuel pumps active. Ignition sequence starting… Three… Two… One…

A shudder rumbles through me, a sense of growing heat. Invictus Potens's joints move, motive fibre bundles tighten, pistons push against gravity. He

stands tall. I feel the Dreadnought's movements as if they are my own, but the sensations are unreal, as if my flesh were numb.

I have little flesh remaining.

Engine test successful. Praise the Omnissiah! Engaging systems array. Engaging weapons links.

Invictus Potens's full systems array comes online in a blaze of coloured text, runes and informational dialogues that fill my sensorium. The date and time appears at the top left, chrono stilled at the moment my last sleep commenced. Targeting reticules paste themselves over the blackness. Ammo counts, all at zero, power levels, shell integrity, temperature, lubrication levels, fuel levels, elevation, air pressure, air mix, nutrient levels, amniotic status, biological component status, and more. They glow green against the black. His systems are hale. Beyond this, I still cannot see.

Remote activation sequence coupling requested. Guard the key, for the key is the gate. Remote activation sequence coupling accepted. Forge pass coding recognised. Identity coding AA/LIF/ 5538 Dreadnought Chassis 'Invictus Potens'. Remote systems control granted.

I sense an intrusion from outside, a questing, electric presence that observes and notes. It infiltrates *Invictus Potens*'s body. His weapons mounts activate and deactivate under this intruder's control. I watch the power feed graphs flicker up and down. These are phantom sensations. My tomb will be limbless, not yet fitted with weaponry for whatever role I have been woken for. The pain grows. I– *Argh!*

Biotic linkage error. Logos Memorandum interrupt. Reinitiating.

This is not a phantom sensation. It is growing, as it always does. It will reach a crescendo that is not quite enough to consume me, and thereafter become tolerable. The climb to that plateau is the worst part, and is not yet done. I grit what is left of my teeth. The muscles in my jaw are wasted. All of them are. My body is broken. *Invictus Potens* is my might, his strength replaces my own. His power uplifts me, that I might serve still. Praise be.

Weapon links functional. Weapon mounts functional. Weapon interface functional. Weapon power couplings functional. Praise the Omnissiah! Engaging auto-senses.

My vision activates, my hearing, my voice. *Invictus Potens*'s augurs flare bright, whiting my sensorium out. I would blink, if I could, but I can do nothing but endure the glare until the view stabilises. It duly does. Grainy

and imperfect, distorted as if viewed through a fish's eye. My sepulchre has been moved from my crusade's strike cruiser, the *Majesty*. I see the Mausoleum of the *Eternal Crusader* instead, flagship of our order.

I am free of the sepulchre's restraints. The oil bath has been drained, the blast screen lowered into the floor, but I am still within the alcove. Not time yet, then, for me to march to war. This is an initial activation, as is standard. I remember everything and nothing. Only my thoughts are my own, only the moment.

A Techmarine and an Apothecary stand before me, clad in their battleplate. Chanting forge-serfs are close by, and thralls attend them. A Chaplain in robes strides the room shouting praises to the Emperor. At the edges of my sight, bent around me by the *Invictus*'s wide-angle augur distortion, I see the stone of my grave, stained yellow by preservative oils.

'*Invictus Potens*! Awake!' declaims the Techmarine as he flicks scented lubricants at me. The Techmarines of the Black Templars follow the rites of the Omnissiah-Emperor punctiliously. I do not recognise him.

'I am awake,' *Invictus Potens* says. I have never been able to think of it as my voice, so deep and harsh: a machine's voice, not a man's.

'Praise be! Praise be! Praise the Ominissiah, who art the Emperor of Man in the form of most holy machine. Praise the melding of the flesh and the steel. Praise the Golden Throne, that which embodies this melding. Praise *Invictus Potens*, a hallowed reflection of our Lord,' the Techmarine says, his forge-thralls chanting with them.

'Praise be,' says the Apothecary, more quietly. The Techmarine looks at my casing, whereas the Apothecary stares deep into the distorting eye of *Invictus*, as if he would see me behind the machine's plating.

'All systems operate within holy parameters. *Invictus Potens* is functioning without the taint of malfunction,' states the Techmarine.

The Apothecary leans in to examine some device plugged into *Invictus*'s front. 'Biologics read healthy. How are you, Brother Adelard?'

He speaks into the Dreadnought's ear, hidden behind the glacis. He addresses me directly, not the machine-man melding I have become, and so uses my old name. I appreciate his attempts to make me welcome, but what is in a name? *Invictus Potens* is my third. It is a label, nothing more.

'Pain,' I say. I hear the strain in *Invictus*'s voice. The pain has yet to reach its maximum level, I know this although there is no gauge to measure it.

The Apothecary nods and tweaks something. Warmth pulses through my wizened remains.

‘Better,’ *Invictus Potens* grates. The Apothecary places his hand briefly upon my sarcophagus in sympathy. His gesture is wasted. I feel nothing that is not directly relevant to the prosecution of war.

I think I recognise the Apothecary.

‘What are my orders, Brother Hengist?’ I say.

‘What are my orders, Brother Hengist?’ *Invictus* says for me.

I am wrong.

‘I am Clovis. Brother-Apothecary Hengist was my master.’ He hesitates. ‘He died seventy-three years ago.’ I have nothing to say to that. I have no memory of Hengist having a novitiate. ‘I understand your error. I inherited his blessed wargear when he fell, praise be,’ he says. ‘The *Eternal Crusader* is en route to the Armageddon sector. An ork invasion, a large one. Many of our brothers have gathered. Do not rouse yourself overly, you will sleep again soon.’

I see activity behind him. Another Dreadnought – an Ironclad – is being exposed. Flashing lights over his sepulchre indicate his oil bath has drained. His sarcophagus door, marked *Cantus Maxim Gloria*, is sliding down. Incense curls around his grave. He is truly ancient, an Old One. This information is presented to me, not recalled.

‘How long?’ I say.

The Techmarine adjusts his bulky equipment. A new line scrolls across my vision.

Time check. Internal chronograph reset. Resetting.

The date blinks out on my display chronometer. When it returns, it is running again.

760998.M41.

Nine-nine-eight.

I have slept for 89 years.

Reset complete. Praise the Lord of Man, praise the Lord of Machines. Praise the binary of the twain.

‘Eighty-nine years?’ *Invictus* speaks.

‘I am sorry,’ Brother Clovis says. ‘There was deterioration in your nervous system, a viral infection. It has been arrested, but it took time, and Marshal Ricard was unwilling to risk you until you were well.’

Marshal Ricard? I remember a Ricard. He was a novitiate, a boy.

‘You awaken me now?’

‘We are waking you all,’ says Clovis.

Invictus Potens’s engine deactivates. The power bleeds from his systems. The light is receding. I have many questions, but his voice is robbed from me. The clamps of the sepulchre reach out and grasp the shell of my tomb.

Testing complete. Testing complete.

Blessed are arms of iron, blessed are feet of steel.

‘Blessed is he who impels them, though his own limbs be shorn from his body,’ say the forge-thralls, following the same cant as *Invictus*’s systems.

Initiating mid-term temporary shutdown.

Blackness returns, crowding out the world. My vision overlay blinks out, the strength goes from the muscle bundles. *Invictus Potens* sags on his legs.

All that I have left is the pain. That never leaves me. Even as I slip into the dreamless sleep it is there. It is there now.

There is a mighty clamour on the embarkation deck. Squads run to their drop pods. I see Brusc, for a moment, my last neophyte, leading a Crusader squad. It is he, I am sure of it. I do not remember how long he has been a Sword Brother, but I recognise his battleplate. Then he is gone.

Prayer, hymns and oaths vie with the noise of machines. Men kneel before Chaplains for the blessings of the Emperor. Ash crosses are smeared upon their brows, oath papers affixed to their armour by serfs with hissing seal stamps.

There is focus here, amid the clanging and the shouts, but an observer would see only disorder. Once each blessing is undertaken, the squad, brothers and neophytes mixed, leaps up with votive cries and jogs to the drop pods, another squad taking its place for prayer.

The last few of the pods sway in loading claws tracking across the ceiling, dragging them out of their armoured storage hangars. Chains wider than *Invictus Potens*’s shoulders rattle as the pods are lowered into position over their launch tubes. The noise is deafening. Auto-worshippers recite endless prayers from metal mouths. Thunderhawk engines whine up and down, and tanks grumble into position. Loading claws bang. Sirens, klaxons, machines, servitors, brothers… All the holy tumult of war’s preparation.

Apothecary Hengist–

Error.

Apothecary *Clovis* leads me to my drop pod. My feet are heavy on the deck. Brother and serf alike bow their heads and clasp swords reversed in front of them as I stride past. I am a Chapter Ancient, a living relic. In the honour of my entombing, they see an echo of the Emperor himself. It is an analogy I am not worthy of. I do not deserve such veneration.

The drop pod is freshly painted, bedecked with seals that will soon burn away. *Invictus*'s name plate is attached to the front.

The *Eternal Crusader* shakes, under the tread of armoured feet, under the fury of ork bombardment, under the pressure of our zeal. This is a full combat drop. An armada of ork vessels assail our flagship outside. We go about our business without fear. The *Eternal Crusader* is strong and our faith is stronger still. The Emperor protects his son's sons. Praise be.

I enter my pod. As the ramps rise, one of our lay preachers shouts out our battle cry: 'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' He, like all the serfs, is armed and armoured. The lowliest of them are capable warriors. Such is our way. There is no room for weakness. Any who can bear arms are expected to do so, no matter their station.

It is silent in the pod. I wait. If it were not for my chronometer, I would not know how long. Time has lost its meaning, like so much else. I do not sleep outside of my hibernation. But I meditate, upon my purpose, upon the Emperor's will, upon the Endless Crusade, and I give thanks that I am still a part of it.

Praise be.

A chime, generated directly in my mind by the sacred technologies of my glorious tomb, announces the setting of the mission chrono. A second time count appears beneath my chronometer. It blinks red three times, counts down to zero, turns green and begins running forward. It is this alone that alerts me to my imminent drop.

A slight shift in my mass centre. I am moving into the drop chute. There is a burst of noise from the escape thrusters. I feel heavy, my flesh body moves in my amniotic fluid, and for a moment I feel with my old skin. The pain intensifies as I shift.

Only for a moment.

Acceleration is constant. I am falling through the atmosphere. They woke us all, Brother Clovis told me. An unusual move. Across Armageddon,

seven of my dead brothers are marching to war again. Three crusades have been established. War wracks the entire system and a good part of this sector. The ork invasion here is of a staggering scale.

I am impatient to join the fight. I have slept too long.

The drop is short, and ends with terrible force. Again, my body moves within the fluids that protect it. I recall similar drops from my other life, when I was a man of flesh and blood. Then the blow of landing jarred every bone in my body. Now I am protected from the worst of it, numbed to it. I am distant from every sensation, and move as if in a dream. Only the pain is constant, curled around me in my tomb, intimately embracing my shattered body.

The doors blow outwards. Pale light falls across *Invictus*'s metal hull. Ahead of me is an ugly ork fortress, an asteroid landed directly on the surface of the world. The land here is dry but not the driest – sub-savannah, low thorny trees and grey grass, all parched. A lush landscape by Armageddon's standards. All is caked with ash. The Season of Fire has recently drawn to a close. The weather is calming, not that you would guess it. The Season of Shadows has begun.

It is my task to aid in the rock's destruction. A worthy task. Battle rages already. I stride into it with great joy in my heart. Praise be!

'Praise be!' roars *Invictus Potens*.

Drop pods fall from the sky all around me, igniting the scrubby vegetation with their braking jets. I am one of the first, the spearhead of the Ash Wastes Crusade second group! Praise be! Fifty-six battle-brothers, forty-nine neophytes. Various armour assets are being landed further out, under Thunderhawk air support. All this and other information scrolls along the edges of my sensorium. Bright flashes and war-lightning show through the ash-tainted sky: the Void Crusade embattled in orbit. As above, so below.

Cantus Maxim Gloria is with me, emerging from his own drop pod sixty-three metres to my right. He is already firing, mass-reactive shells flaring as they accelerate away from the storm bolter slung under his arm.

I never knew him as a brother. What his name was is a mystery to me. He is and always will be *Cantus Maxim Gloria*, and that is how the other brothers see me. Not as Sword Brother Adelard, once-Marshal, but as *Invictus Potens*.

Am I *Invictus*? Or am I still Adelard? I no longer know who I am. It does

not matter. Only the will of the Emperor is important. His will is that I serve. Praise be.

I seek targets of my own as I stride towards *Cantus Maxim Gloria*. Boxes and circles blink around the rock, highlighting potential threats, mission priorities and points of strategic interest. I determine a mob of screaming xenos, coming at us quickly, to be of the most immediate threat. *Invictus* continues to walk towards *Cantus*, but I pivot his torso and my sarcophagus ninety degrees to draw a line upon the aliens. By will alone, I discharge my storm bolter. The recoil of it, so slight on the great arm of my glorious tomb, feels sublime. War is the greatest act of worship, and I perform it gladly for our Lord.

Several orks are destroyed. The rest scatter for cover.

More drop pods are coming in to land. Fifteen are on the field. It seems all have made it down. Doors blow open and Black Templars emerge, covered by the storm bolters and deathwind launchers of their insertion craft. Controlled by machine-spirits, these switch back and forth with mechanical swiftness and precision, felling orks as my brothers form up for the assault.

The rock is seventy-nine point four metres at its highest point, an alien cliff-face dropped on the landscape like a pebble tossed by a careless giant. Steel doors and shutters cover its apertures. They slide back and the wide muzzles of ork guns are pushed out. Orks pour down from ramps and ladders, orks scream atop the battlements along its craggy top. I am surprised at how untouched the landscape appears around it. No scorching of the vegetation, no impact crater. A delicate descent.

Orks are remarkable creatures, a survivor race. I have fought them in swamps, forests, deserts, hives, snow, the sea and the void. They infest them all equally. Their success makes them all the more despicable. They are brutish, violent, inimical to all order and impervious to sense. I respect them and I hate them. I kill all the enemies of man with satisfaction, but I particularly enjoy killing orks. Praise be.

‘We go forwards,’ says *Cantus*. I let him advance ahead of me, to absorb the fire raining down on us from the walls of the rock. Six Centurions fall in behind us. We are the breaching party. Our brothers lay down suppressive fire where they can. It is not our preferred way of combat and they will be envious of our advance.

As we approach, I kill many orks with my storm bolter, but do not use my

assault cannon, not yet. Its ammunition counter stands at full, a healthy dark green. Thirty thousand rounds are in my hoppers. A goodly number, but I will receive no more until the battle is over. ‘The Emperor rewards with victory he who counts his ammunition’, I recall a Chaplain saying. Which one, I cannot remember. I have known many.

We approach the gateway. *Cantus Maxim Gloria*’s seismic hammer rises and comes alive.

I think back to the briefing. Three crusades, all bearing fresh names for the campaign – Helsreach, left behind by Helbrecht some months ago under Reclusiarch Grimaldus, the freshly instituted Ash Wastes under Marshal Ricard and Marshal Amalrich. Lastly, the Void Crusade, under High Marshal Helbrecht himself. We have arrived late to this war. We must pay for that with the blood of the foe.

I had never met Helbrecht before yesterday. I have the logos memorandum replay part of his speech.

‘A victory is required. Morale demands it. Too many have died in this system already. The orks believe their fortresses inviolable, but worse, the warriors of the Imperium come to think of them that way also. The Salamanders enjoy some early success, but we too shall prove the case to be contrary. Let the orks taste the wrath of the Black Templars,’ he said. *‘We shall not leave all the glory to the Salamanders! Let strike the true believers, the hammer of the Emperor. The sons of Dorn!’*

I hear he is a man of great temper and exceptional skill at arms. He seems worthy of his position.

Cantus Maxim Gloria approaches the door to the rock, wide and high. The orks build roughly, and this door is no exception. But it is strong.

‘I will provide ingress,’ he booms. ‘Support me.’

His mighty seismic hammer sets to work, jerking forward, reeling back, bashing at the door relentlessly. The attached meltagun scours into the metal. Centurions join him, their siege drills chewing holes the size of plates, twists of swarf falling around their feet. I imagine the stink of hot metal. Bullets, missiles and many rocks bounce from our armour. I slay where I can, not a great tally here. The angles are poor.

A bright lance beam hits one of the Centurions, cutting downward through his neck into his body. My brother inside is killed, his Centurion suit locking his corpse in place. I have *Invictus* step backwards, tilting his torso

back. I put myself at risk doing so, but this outrage must be avenged. *Invictus*'s sophisticated targeting systems pick out the one responsible, a burly ork hefting some incomprehensible energy weapon on a jutting bastion above. For the first time that day, I let the assault cannon speak. The barrels whine and pick up speed. It is operating at optimum efficiency. The rites have been performed diligently.

A stream of bullets spark from the rock, sending gravel pattering down onto the breaching party. The orks above are driven back, and the assault from above peters out. I cannot see if I have slain the burly gunner. *Invictus*'s readings are inconclusive.

The doors burst inwards with a resounding boom, one ripped so roughly from its housing that it forces out a small avalanche of rock. *Cantus* rips at the remains with his power fist. Then we are inside.

From that moment on, my assault cannon is not silent.

We wade through a sea of howling green faces, into a labyrinth of roughly hewn rock and abominable machines. These mechanisms the Centurions destroy. None can stand before us – our armour is proof against the crude axes and firearms of the orks. *Cantus* and I smash them down with impunity. We are surrounded, but that is of no consequence. Our mission goal is close.

Pain is my companion. The pain is constant, all encompassing. Death's legacy, a reminder that I no longer live, my gift from the Emperor and one I willingly share with these orks. A plasma burst from a xenos weapon ended my last actions as a Space Marine. I remember the heat of it, my flesh burning under my armour – agony, agony, agony searing out my eyes. They never told me, once I had been entombed, how much of me was left. We prayed, we celebrated, but we did not speak of my injuries. I have determined, after five centuries in this armour, that very little of my body survived. One arm. My upper torso. Most of my head. Perhaps my face still sits on my skull. Perhaps not.

The pain I feel now is nothing to the pain I felt then. But it is with me, always. I let it fuel my anger, I bless the bolts of our gun with it, it launches each blow of *Invictus Potens*'s fist, lends its fury to the spinning barrels of the assault cannon. This weapon, such a weapon! It clears corridors of greenskins in an eyeblink, leaving their remains to slide from the walls.

Warning. Ammunition at fifty per cent.

I check the ammunition counter. It is now orange. Fourteen thousand three hundred and sixty-one rounds left, but I cannot afford to slow down. There are thousands of orks here. I blow them to pieces, crush them underfoot, smash them down. Skulls crack in my giant's hand. So many of them die, die, die, but always there are more.

'We near the mission point,' says *Cantus*. 'Stand ready.'

We burst through another armoured door, into a large cavity at the heart of the fortress.

'Here,' he says, striding forwards. He is authoritative. I wonder who he was when he lived. A marshal perhaps? A castellan? He may have been a simple brother. Death changes a man.

The Centurions are behind us, walking backwards to cover our vulnerable rear plating. The systems array informs me that there are four of them left; where the other fell I did not see. There are many doors here. All of them are opening. Hundreds of orks swarm within.

'Activating teleport beacon,' says *Cantus*. The module mag-locked to his rear armour begins to blink with unhurried blue light. I carry one also, as do the Centurions. Multiple redundancy. We activate them all. It is a signal. Outside, the remainder of the Ash Wastes Crusade will be readying themselves, singing the *Pugno Gloriosa Mundi*, ready to rush into the rock.

There are over nine hundred orks in the chamber, according to *Invictus*'s best estimate. Many are of the larger kind, leaders and specialists. I highlight these and commit their positions to *Invictus*'s targeting memory.

'Stand firm,' I say.

The orks stand, staring at us, roaring at us, making their crude threat displays, but make no move against us, until one, a huge beast, moves out from the crowd and bellows a long challenge. It is taken up by the others, and they charge.

My assault cannon speaks until it has run out of words. Thereafter I use its red-hot barrels to brand orks with the mark of death. It is a holy mark, but no absolution comes with it, only annihilation.

A group of orks armed with large explosive charges and crude missiles come shoving through the crowd. I raise *Invictus*'s storm bolter, but that too is empty. Red mars the green of my systems array – no ammo, overheating, dropping fuel.

They charge towards *Cantus Maxim Gloria*. I interpose myself to save him, and doom myself.

They are all over my tomb, slapping charges to its limbs. One swings its strange rocket hammer at me, but I catch him, engulfing head and shoulders in *Invictus*'s fist, rendering them into a pulp.

There is a dim blue glow coming from the centre of the room. Greasy smoke smears the air. Shapes form. Marshal Ricard and Sword Brothers in Terminator armour step out from the light. Our mission is a success. But it is too late for me.

There is an explosion on *Invictus*'s lower portions, then another. The ground rushes up at me as he falls. My tomb's pain arrests me, but it is feeble compared to my own, and is quickly over.

Warning. Warning. Warning. Systems compromised. Await aid. Fortitude is the ultimate fortress.

There follows a long list of damaged machinery. Blinking red text and runes. All I see beyond them is the gritty floor. I do not read it. I do not need to read it. There is another explosion, this time upon *Invictus*'s back. Shortly after, the systems array blinks and goes out, never to come again. I lose my connection with *Invictus* entirely.

I am left in the dark with my pain.

My fluid is pouring out through the crack in my sarcophagus. *Invictus* is sorely injured, but my brothers will slaughter every ork that stands between they and he, even if the greenskins are a million in number. *Invictus* will fight again. I, however, will not.

I pray.

I realise that I can still hear the sounds of battle, the hymns of my brothers, the triple bark of bolt rounds being expelled, igniting, exploding. I smile, or attempt to. I hear with my own ears for the first time in five centuries – the final time.

I do not know what to expect next. It strikes me as amusing that I actually expect something more, that I assume the procession of events cannot end. That is why humanity is so indomitable. Even dying, we do not stop. Perhaps, as a race, we die even now, and my situation is analogous in miniature to the situation of every man, woman and child of our species: awaiting the next event, when there is only death.

I will never know if this is the case or not. I have faith that mankind will prevail. If I have no faith, what do I have? Defeat. I have faith. Even as I die I know victory.

These are my thoughts: What happens to us when we die? Does the Emperor wait for me, whole in spirit as he no longer is in life, to call me to his side and sit with him at the table? Will it simply end? There is no golden light, no sense of impending doom, no terrifying sensation. No comfort either.

The last of the fluid has gone, exposing my skin to the air. I am aware now, of how little of me there is left, trapped in this glorious tomb. Things tug at my flesh, the pipes and cables of *Invictus*'s interface. A terrible chill grips me. I struggle with the urge to breathe, but I have no lungs. The oxygen levels in my blood are dipping dangerously low. My skin crawls as my remaining genetic gifts, the Emperor's holy boon that made me into a Space Marine – broken things now – struggle to keep me alive. Too late, too late. The final journey approaches.

Consciousness recedes. I have felt little emotion since the day I was entombed. Pride, zeal, courage, honour – all come back to me as I die, and I am grateful to feel them again. The day I was chosen to become a Black Templar. My elevation to Sword Brother. My days as a marshal. The battle on Vellinus, the reaving of the Cemetery Worlds, the misguided Passion of The False Saint Cleon, the hunting of the Ork Wyrd. All ended in blood and death. Brusc, Oberon, Danifer, Theilred, Chardin… So many faces I have known, all going into the black. A million deaths by my hand. If not all were righteous, most were. I can ask for no more than that. Was it not blessed Artemisia who said 'Better a thousand good men die than one traitor go free'?

Older memories, long neglected, resurface. Golden light, a man's laughter. My father, perhaps. A rare moment of peace on my benighted homeworld. He pushes me on a swing, a rope on a tree branch over the only safe water for kilometres. I am shrieking with fright at how high and fast he is pushing me. He pushes harder.

'Be brave, Kellon!' he shouts. 'Be brave!' I shriek louder, a boy's squeals. He reminds me of how brave I am when the gentar reptiles come. I am already inured to death, already a warrior, but it does not prevent my shrill cries, a little fear, but mostly pleasure. He mocks me fondly for it. 'I have

been brave for all my days!’ I shout in my boy’s voice. ‘I have known no fear!’ But he is a memory and cannot hear.

I close my eyes, I listen to that laughter. Four years after this I had no father, and no home, but that is yet to come. Such pleasure: simple, potent, and pure. So different to the holy joys of battle, so different to the raptures of worship. There is no aim to it, no reason – it simply is. I wonder what my life would have been had I not trekked to the keep, if I had not undertaken the trial. I think this, only for an instant, Lord, but I think it. Forgive me this last sin, O Emperor.

The air of my youth is warm but I am cold. A shadow comes, dimming the sun. My father does not notice. I try to get his attention. Still he does not hear, trapped as he is in the past. It is fitting, perhaps, for the past is all I have. The final curtain is drawing over my life. I have fought well, have I not, O Master of Mankind? My toil is over, and I go gladly to my reward.

Despite my faith, I am afraid I will not be heard.

But praise be! Thanks to the Emperor, he hears me! He hears me! There comes a last blessing. The cold recedes. I am warm. I am free. I turn to tell the fading vision of my past, calling out in joy to the shadows in the thickening dark.

‘The pain is gone,’ I cry. ‘The pain is gone!’

++ Appended Black Templars Forge note, 987721/3/2 AA/LIF/5538 Dreadnought Chassis ‘Invictus Potens’ internal datalogue. Brother Adelard Logos Memorandum records cease. ‘Invictus Potens’ recovered. ++

++ Praise be. ++

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‘There’s definitely something there!’

Brother Sunno leaned over to look through the open door of the driver’s cab, shouting to make himself heard over the throb of Rhino’s engines. He had his helmet off. The atmosphere in the tank was thick and bitter, but better, he said, than breathing endlessly recycled suit air. The four Black Templars in the battered passenger compartment, two novitiates and two initiates, shifted their gazes from whatever internal space they’d been examining and glanced at the forward comms panel. The novitiates blinked slowly, as if perplexed. It had been a hard few days for them all.

‘Bring *Cataphraxes* to a halt,’ ordered Brusc, sword brother of the Ash Waste Crusade, commanding officer of this sorry remnant. He drummed metal-clad fingers on his armoured thigh, rattling out a brief, tinny tattoo in the Rhino’s passenger cab. Near silence fell suddenly as Sunno cut the engine. Small sounds grew large: the wind whistling over the tank’s fittings, muted by thick armour; the almost inaudible whine of power armour at rest; the thunderous breathing of the five giants within the tank.

The communications array on the forward wall hissed unhelpfully, its screen set to seeking auspex and fizzing with green static snow.

Brusc exhaled contemplatively, his eyes shifting to each of the warriors with him. Osric, Sunno in the cab, the novitiates Marcomar and Doneal, not yet initiates, already mightier than fully grown unenhanced men. The tight scar tissue on his face itched as it always did when he was tired. He did his best to ignore it.

‘Brother Osric? What say you?’ asked Brusc eventually.

Osric frowned, stood, took a couple of bowed steps forward and slapped the comms array with his armoured fist. The screen jumped. Thick lines crawled down from the top. Electric snow returned.

‘Are you sure you should do that, brother?’ asked Brusc. ‘It is not the manner in which I’ve seen the tech-priests address the machine.’

‘Half of what they do is striking things,’ muttered Osric.

Brusc barked out a laugh. The boys jumped at the noise, they were not yet acquainted with his ways.

‘That’s as may be, but you not know the correct preparatory prayers.’

‘It still works, sword brother, and I’ve got something. Listen!’

‘Fall bac… …o sector 15… Enem… eeee…’ The vox broke off into a cascade of menacing buzzes.

‘The signal’s getting worse,’ grumbled Brusc. His good humour deserted him as quickly as it came. He was mercurial like that, as Osric well knew. It made others wary of him, but not Osric.

‘The Season of Fire on Armageddon. What are we to expect?’ asked Sunno.

‘The Kannheim tower must be down again,’ said Osric. ‘The orks knock it down as quickly as Munitorum put it up again.’

‘First the satellites, now this,’ said Sunno. ‘The orks are smashing every broadcast tower and mast they come across. They are no fools. We have our orders. Retreat, regroup. Give the word, sword brother, and I’ll add more dust to this accursed storm.’

Brusc said nothing. The wind outside hooted. Storm-blown gravel pattered against the hull.

‘What do you think then, brother? Do we investigate?’ asked Osric. ‘There’s supposed to be a field hospital hereabouts. It might be that. Standing orders from High Command are to keep watch for stragglers. They might not have heard.’

‘And it might be a nest of orks,’ said Sunno. ‘We are not subject to the orders of any but Marshall Ricard, and he said only to regroup. Let standard humans look out for their own. I say we move on.’

‘Come now! A nest of orks would be well. I could do with wetting my blade, not sitting in this box day in day out,’ said Osric with a broad smile.

That pleased Brusc. He smiled too, a somewhat hideous expression on his disfigured face, and jabbed his finger at Osric. ‘Very well. Come on, you’re

with me.’

‘Not a waste of time then, brother?’ asked Osric, addressing Brusc but speaking chiefly to Sunno.

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ said Brusc, ‘but if I leave you in here hitting the machinery you’re likely to so offend Catraphaxes that the Machine-God himself will seize up your armour. Sunno, stay with the neophytes.’

‘Yes, sword brother,’ said Sunno. He turned back to the Rhino’s drive console, irked that his counsel had not been followed.

‘Best cover your mouths, boys,’ said Brusc.

‘Yes, my lord,’ said the neophytes. Already the veterans of fifteen battles, they still cast their eyes down and spoke humbly whenever Brusc addressed them. They called him the Old Man, and not just the neophytes. True, he was the oldest living Black Templar, or so it was reckoned. Perhaps even the oldest of all the Sons of Dorn, saving Captain Lysander of the Imperial Fists, but it was not a name he encouraged here; there was another Old Man on Armageddon. Although far more ancient than Yarrick, Brusc thought the commissar deserved the affection and respect the name best represented.

He regarded the men. Five of the crusaders left from ten, a pitiful score, and a tally of dead he was not relishing relaying to Marshall Ricard. Marcomar had taken the loss of his master particularly hard. His knee jogged up and down, and he gripped his sniper rifle too tightly across his knees. By Brusc’s assessment, Marcomar was close to failing the final stages of his initiation. ‘Cover your mouths,’ he repeated, more gently. He scratched his unnaturally smooth cheek then nodded at Osric. Both of them put their helmets on. Live displays burst into life across Brusc’s field of vision as his sensorium engaged. After checking his visual markers to ensure his armour was hale, Brusc activated *Cataphraxes*’s door rune with a thought. He and Osric retrieved their weapons from the rack: a chainsword and bolt pistol each.

The Rhino’s rear ramp squealed open, its mechanisms fouled by wind-blown dust. Brusc muttered quick thanks to Catraphaxes’s machine-spirit. He worried it might grow angry, and not only from Osric’s less than reverent treatment. Few things made by man were suited to Armageddon’s Ash Wastes. Billows of dust and ash flooded the passenger compartment, setting off alarms in the rhino’s cab.

Brusc and Osric stamped out into the dust storm. The sound of the alarms

were lost instantly to the howl of the gale. They spoke the rites of awakening to prepare their weapons for battle, but they did not clip their wrist lanyard chains in place – not yet.

‘Ah, I’ve got a signal now. Imperial marker beacon. It is the field hospital,’ said Osric. A moment later, Brusc had it too.

‘Any vox?’

‘Nothing,’ said Osric.

‘Then we better knock.’

The Black Templars were virtually blind, would have been blind were it not for the spirits of their armour. Blinking arrows and compass wheels on their visor interface guided them toward the installation. When they grew close to it, wireframe outlines sprang into life, giving hard edges of light to the shadowy buildings coalescing from the brown air. Only when they were close enough to touch the perimeter fence did the shapes become identifiable as prefabricatum units, the same as could be found on hundreds of thousands of worlds across the galaxy.

‘As you say,’ said Brusc, only putting away his weapons when he confirmed by sight what his suit told him. He apologised to his gun and blade as they maglocked to his armour.

‘Are you sure it is still in human hands?’ said Osric. He was as reluctant to put up his own gun and sword unblooded.

‘Absolutely,’ said Brusc. ‘I see no sign of orkish defilement, no sign of battle, even.’ They spoke via helmet vox. Their speaker grilles were full of sand, any words spat out of them snatched away by the ferocious wind. The rattle of pumice and sand against their helmets was so loud, they were forced nearly to shout.

Osric did as Brusc had, attaching his chainsword to his left hip, his bolt pistol to his right. ‘We’ll be lucky to get close without them shooting us,’ said Osric.

‘They’ll be lucky to survive if they do,’ said Brusc. The storm put him in a poor mood, and he was only half-joking.

They followed the edge of the perimeter, a segmented, plascrete defence line losing its feet in the ash. ‘No one about,’ said Brusc. ‘Sloppy.’

‘Not even the orks are out in this,’ said Osric.

‘No excuse for a lack of vigilance,’ said Brusc. ‘There, a guard post.’

Two hexagonal bunkers guarded a roadway into the camp that stopped

approximately spitting distance from the gateway, already buried by the desert. The gate was a section of chainlink fencing in a wheeled frame, less a defence and more a formality. Osric grunted at the sight of it. ‘That’ll keep the orks out,’ he said dismissively.

The troopers manning the bunker recognised the brothers for what they were and did not present their arms. One came out. Huddled against the wind he seemed tiny and frail, his outline partly hidden by veils of ash so that it looked like he was being abraded to nothing and would be carried off in fragments by the next gust.

The Adeptus Astartes were solid in the teeth of the wind, but the guardsman did not have their strength or their armour, and rocked unsteadily in the eddies whirling off the hospital’s units. The man snapped a salute as best he could, a curious version of the aquila, repeated three times over groin, heart and forehead. The brothers banged their arms together in the mark of the Templars’ cross in response.

‘Lieutenant Sanjeed Ghaskar of the Jopal indentured squadrons,’ he shouted over the storm. A turban clad his head, a continuation of it, a band of cloth, looped around his neck and wrapped about his face tight up against his goggled eyes. It didn’t quite cover his cheeks and revealed a hint of a glossy black beard. His obeisance paid, he shielded this exposed part of himself with a gloved hand, and hunched over again, his other arm protectively over his stomach. ‘We are glad to see you! Or perhaps not,’ he yelled. ‘The coming of the Angels of Death often presages disaster.’

‘We go only where disaster is, this is true,’ said Brusc, his voice now projected from his speaker grille at maximum volume. ‘It will come here soon enough, I am sure, but not today. We are passing through. There are orders to investigate all Imperial outposts to ensure they have received the command to fall back.’

Ghaskar looked up sharply at that.

‘You have not heard? The fall of Acheron?’ asked Osric, who now did have to shout. ‘It is good that we give you the courtesy of our visit then, as we are not beholden to act on these orders.’

‘We best talk inside. I grant you my permission to enter the Hospice of the Blessed Lady Santanna,’ said Ghaskar. He performed a shallow bow.

‘Most gracious,’ said Osric, somewhat sarcastically. Ghaskar beckoned them on, and the three of them passed through the gate.

Privately Osric added to Brusc, ‘It is going to take me a week to repair the finish on my armour.’

‘One must honour one’s battlegear, did I teach you nothing?’ asked Brusc, although his tone was light. This was the way between them – once master and pupil, they had long been friends. Both shared certain characteristics of irreverence. The bond between had always been strong.

‘I enjoy it repairing my gear, and I humbly honour it. Who doesn’t? It is a fine time to meditate and pay thanks to the Emperor that one still lives and reflect upon the fight. Only it is unsatisfying repairing damage from the weather rather than that won in good, honest battle. What prayer and glory can I offer to the Lord of Man through polishing out sand scratches?’

Brusc looked around as they passed through the rough streets of the facility. It was built on the standard Astra Militarum grid pattern, a north-south and east-west road leading to gate sites, although they had instated only one here, at the west. Side roads led off between buildings. It was small, an unimpressive place barely two hundred metres across each side. A difficult site to hold. A challenge.

‘Something tells me brother,’ he said, ‘that you may soon get your wish to offer true praise. I feel the Emperor’s hand at work here.’

They were directed into a long low prefabricatum, one of forty indistinguishable from the rest. Inside was a medicae ward of thirty or so beds. The astonished wounded stared at the giants in their midst as they strode through the flimsy building, showering dust from their scored black armour. The whole prefabricatum rocked under their tread.

Lieutenant Ghaskar led them to a busy woman by a dying man’s bed at the far end of the room. ‘Sister Rosa of the Hospitallers of the Adepta Sororitas,’ he said, then made his leave.

Sister Rosa was a squat, unlovely woman with hard features and grey hair. Her face was blemished with numerous rad-moles. Her pleasure at seeing fellow warriors of the faith was at best guarded, turning soon to outright annoyance when they relayed their message. She stepped away from the dying man, drawing the Space Marines after her as she checked the charts of other soldiers.

‘We cannot leave,’ she said.

‘You must,’ said Brusc. ‘This entire sector is collapsing, thanks to the

treachery of von Strab. The orks are regrouping, their warbands joining. Their outriders are heading this way.'

'We will remain,' she said stubbornly, 'until the tempest has expended its strength.' She moved onto another bed.

'Sister, this storm will not blow over for several days,' said Brusc.

'And when it does blow over, we shall be ready to depart for Infernus.'

'You must leave now. All forces are falling back to Hive Helsreach. When the storm blows over, the orks will be ready to attack. They will destroy you,' said Brusc sharply.

'Come now, show some respect, she is of a holy order,' said Osric privately. 'She is as marred as you by her service. You do little honour to our order or your title as sword brother.' Publicly, he said, 'Forgive my brother. We are a choleric breed, more given to attack than consideration.'

Sister Rosa pressed her lips tightly together.

'Nevertheless,' Brusc continued, with a glance at his ex-pupil, 'I am correct. We have orders to fall back ourselves. This is no easy thing for us to do. Every part of our being urges us to go onwards and avenge our losses. But we will not. Considered retreat is the right course of action, if only so we might advance again refreshed and rearmed. You must come with us. This hospice was behind friendly lines. It is no longer. The orks are closing in, and will move on you when the weather allows. The materiel is unimportant. Leave now.'

She withdrew her head, sharply, multiplying her chins to three. Her face was etched with a scowl. 'You do not understand. I do not speak of materiel, but the wounded. Not all of my patients can be moved without great care. I cannot pack up the facility at such short notice. I will not go.'

'Then you must bring what you can, and help those who can move. This is no time to be sentimental. We shall offer the Emperor's Mercy to those who will not survive the trip,' said Brusc.

'I have received no orders from my superiors,' she said.

'You have heard them from me,' said Brusc.

'Neither you, brother, nor your Marshall have any right to order me,' she said. '"From many pillars is the Imperium forged, each to its own burden."' she quoted. 'I, like you, am not subject to the whims of the Astra Militarum either. We sisters answer to a higher authority.'

'True,' said Brusc. 'But the orders make sense. Our Marshall has followed

suit, ordering us in the same manner that other units have been ordered. He is a wise man, well-versed in the arts of war. His wisdom should be enough to convince you. I question your own wisdom if it is not.'

'What do you suggest then?' huffed Rosa.

'We can offer you our protection and guidance back to Imperial lines. Stay here, and you will perish.'

'If it is the Emperor's will, then so be it,' she said.

'She's a stubborn one,' said Osric privately. 'I like her. She's an awful lot like you.'

The sister stood tall, and continued. 'You are correct. Without you we shall perish. So then do your duty. Remain here and protect us while we make ready to leave,' she said.

Osric gave a throaty chuckle. 'She is like you.'

Brusc shifted his weight, his dust-clogged armour plates rasping over one another under his dirty white surcoat. 'Give me one reason, one reason alone why I should defy the orders of my Marshall and stay here to defend this collection of broken men,' he said.

'Blood,' she said immediately. 'Only the blood of the faithful can hold back the darkness. We are all the Emperor's proxies. His light shows the way, but he cannot act directly. Through us,' she pointed at her own chest. 'Through me, him, them, the ill and the wounded. They are all the Emperor's instruments, as much as you are, lesser though they are, broken though they are. They are the blades of His will, they have been tested in battle, and come back honed. When they are healed they will fight better for it, and you would waste them without a thought. You stand there before me, 'brother',' she mocked him with the word, 'and chide me for sentimentality, but you are mistaken. It is not sentimentality that will have me stay here, but the Emperor's purpose. I know of your chapter, brother. You crusade and crusade and crusade. But you cannot cleanse the galaxy on your own. Even if you could, could you hold your conquests? Every world? To your credit, your order alone in all the Adeptus Astartes I have witnessed count yourself as true believers, warriors of the Divine Emperor. So tell me, crusader, by whose authority do you cast aside the instruments of our God? You discard His tools, and in doing so you defy His will. Not even your vaunted Marshall has the impertinence for that.'

Brusc stared at the woman. Her head came only as high as the heraldic

cross on his surcoat. He considered leaving, he considered telling her that, actually, it was by Marshall Ricard's authority that he would abandon these broken tools of the Emperor to the choking sands because there were others more worthy of his efforts.

He did not. Sister Rosa stared unwaveringly at him, her brows drawn in. Her ruined face crinkled around the eyes. Her hand leapt to her chest when Brusc burst into loud laughter.

She recovered her composure with admirable speed. 'Do you mock me? Do you mock my words? Do you mock the Emperor?'

'No, no!' said Brusc. 'It is a long time since I have been upbraided so by a woman. You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago.'

'You ignored her too, I suppose? Go then,' she said. 'Leave us here to die. Let your own laughter and shame hound you across the wastes.'

Brusc laid a massive hand on her shoulder, his gauntlet engulfing it entirely. He kneeled in front of her and bowed his head, his mirth gone.

'I have my reason, holy sister,' he said. 'You speak well. I am shamed.' He looked up at her, and carefully removed his helmet, setting it to the side on the floor. His burned skull – covered in smooth synthetic skin and blotched scar tissue, his scalp patched unevenly with hair – held no horror for her, and she saw the humour had not entirely left his face, although it was leavened now with the utmost sincerity.

'The Black Templars will fight by your side,' he said.

She nodded her thanks. 'Your Reclusiarch Grimaldus has won a great victory at Helsreach. I hear he clawed his way from the rubble of the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. If your faith is as true as you say, then you must see the hand of the Emperor in this. He watches over us all. His attention is on this world. If we are true to our purpose and loud in our prayers then we will prevail. I will ensure all that can be done to speed the evacuation, is done.'

'We will pray for your efforts, and freely offer any assistance you might deem necessary.'

She curtly nodded once and bustled off, giving orders as she went. Activity burst around her like shrapnel from a bomb.

Osric watched her go. 'See, I knew I liked her,' he said.

'Brother Osric, do not speak to me like that again, the way you did in front of Sister Rosa.'

‘I was right to do so, brother,’ said Osric amiably. ‘You were being unreasonable.’

‘Yes,’ said Brusc. ‘Yes you were, and yes I was. Diplomacy is not my strongest attribute. Still, do not do it again.’

Osric made a little, dismissive noise. ‘Then do not give me cause to. You are our leader here, brother – we expect the best of you. If you’re not going to live up to the example required then I reserve the right to remind you.’

Brusc laughed – he was ever a man quick to anger and quick to laughter. Brother Osric rather relied on that, he always had. ‘You should be a sword brother, not me.’

‘Maybe,’ said Osric. He paused, then spoke in earnest. ‘Recommend me, brother, enter my name into the ring of honour. My sword is ready for the challenge.’

‘Seriously?’ asked Brusc. ‘You want me to put you forward? You might find yourself duelling with me for your place. We both know who the better swordsman is.’

Osric nodded. ‘Nevertheless, I am deadly serious. I am ready.’

Brusc retrieved his helmet, covered his mutilated face and walked out from the ward. ‘I’ll consider it. Emperor alone knows too many of our best have fallen here. But before you face the blades of the Sword Brethren, we must survive the attentions of the foe.’

Seven hours later, when preparations to abandon the hospice were well underway, the storm lifted. Armageddon’s sun peered meekly through the whirling screens of dust and ash spat out by the world’s volcanoes. It was so wan that Brusc could look it full on without filtering. It had become a pale smear, the light it shone on the Ash Wastes anaemic. He and the others walked the perimeter. The indentured men of Jopal needed no overseeing, but the presence of the Angels of Death inspired and frightened them in equal measure, and they worked all the harder when they paced by. Ghaskar’s small garrison had turned out in full, bolstered by many of the less gravely sick. Barricades were being erected on every street. Fire positions covered the major intersections. Heavy weapons batteries were arrayed to provide linked fields of fire. Men hurried to and fro, stocking the line with crates of spare ammunition and water butts.

‘By the Throne,’ said Osric as he surveyed the featureless landscape

beyond the defence line, ‘what a miserable place to die.’

Brusc gave him a look, one Osric could feel even though Brusc wore his helmet. Despite Brusc’s intentions, it made Osric smile.

‘And we should not die, when so many others have?’ said Brusc.

‘Emperor willing, no,’ said Osric. He spat ashy sand from his mouth with an irritated expression. The air was thick with it still and he had unwisely removed his helmet. ‘Death is our ultimate reward, but I am not yet ready for it. My crusading days are far from done. I have much blood to spill for the Emperor yet. If he decrees I am to die here, then that is His will and I accept it, but…’ his voice trailed off. ‘Still, visibility’s back up to several hundred metres,’ said Osric. ‘We’ll be able to select targets at maximum range. I hate firing blind.’

‘The way you fire, I doubt it would matter.’

‘Blade work’s more my forte, I admit,’ Osric said. ‘You should have trained me better.’

‘Defence in depth – these Jopali are impressive,’ said Sunno. ‘What forces do we have?’

‘Two hundred and fifty-three healthy men, almost that again walking wounded. Seven Hospitaller Warrior-Medicae, twenty-six medical servitors. Fifteen pieces of light ordinance, not counting those mounted the external bunkers. Four chimeras, a taurox, our own *Cataphraxes*, us and a preacher.’

‘Not the greatest army on Armageddon,’ said Sunno. ‘Will it be enough?’

‘We had better hope so,’ said Brusc. He clapped Sunno on the pauldron. ‘But I have fought worse odds.’

‘I have met some ferocious preachers in my time,’ said Sunno.

‘Brother Osric is right, of course…’ said Brusc.

‘When am I not?’

‘…the Jopal Indentured will need every advantage. The further they can fire, and the less atmospheric dissipation to their weapons, the better.’ Brusc eyed a trooper’s lasgun disdainfully. ‘They would be better served by other guns.’

‘That is all they have,’ said Sunno grimly.

‘Then they will have to do, as they have done on a million battlefields across the galaxy since the Emperor took his crusade to the stars.’

‘Listen to him, novitiates!’ said Osric, turning to face the two squires trailing them. He gestured expansively. ‘He speaks well, it is not our right

to dismiss any servant of the Emperor. For He has ordained that we fight together on this battlefield! It is his will that brings us here, just as it is His will that we are made to protect the likes of these unaltered men. Too many of the Adeptus Astartes allow their superiority to turn to contempt for the Emperor's subjects. Never forget what we were made for, and that valour can be contained in the most fragile of vessels. Service can be rendered by all.'

'Praise be,' said Sunno and Brusc.

The Guardsmen stood taller at mention of their valour. Doneal and Marcomar nodded solemnly. Osric let them pass him then slapped them on the back, staggering them. 'Be of better cheer lads, for soon we fight the ork!'

'I would have vengeance,' said Marcomar quietly.

'And you shall have it novitiate, fear not,' said Sunno.

Brusc brought his small squad to a stop. 'Now, Brother Marcomar, up on that roof with your sniper rifle.' Brusc pointed to the highest roof in the battered facility, a delta-level comms tower, its dishes and antennae useless. 'Tell me, when the battle is upon us, what do you aim for?'

Marcomar's response was leaden but quick. 'Aim for the largest, their officer cadre and specialists. Track and eliminate threats. Destroy those that would threaten the weakest points of our line.' His eyes slid slowly to his left, toward the Guardsmen dragging open crates of lasgun packs to the defence line.

Osric cleared his throat, a slight shake of his head. 'Remember what I just said, neophyte.' Marcomar nodded his understanding and stared ahead.

'Go on then,' said Brusc. 'To your station.'

Marcomar nodded, shifting his grip on his gun bag, and went to his post.

Sister Rosa was passing and stopped at Brusc's shoulder. She made little concession to the harsh environment beyond a snug rebreather, an apron and protective sleeves over her robes. Brusc suspected that was more to protect them, not her.

'Your preparations go well? My sisters and laity are ready to aid the wounded. For now they pack apace.'

'As well as can be hoped, sister,' said Brusc. 'We have little to do. Your Lieutenant Ghaskar is a capable man.' He looked her up and down. 'Do you not have something… Do you not have more appropriate attire for war?'

She shook his concerns away with one hand, the other clutched rolls of bandages tight to her chest. ‘I have performed my duty as Warrior-Medicae to both the Astra Militarum and Sisters of Battle, brother,’ she said. ‘But my armour no longer fits, and my fighting days are long behind me. The Emperor’s grace is enough protection for me.’ She rapped on his chest with a knuckle. ‘Not all the faithful have need of such unsubtle shields.’

Brusc ignored her jibe. ‘And how are the preparations?’

She pointed away to the square at the centre of the compound where men loaded seven massive haulers standing nose to tail in a circle. The Space Marine’s Rhino waited silently at the entrance to the road leading to the gate, a dog guarding a herd of kine.

‘We are nearly done. We shall have to abandon the structure, of course, but I have loaded all movable supplies and equipment. Those wounded that cannot fight are ready to be put onboard. The most critical cases we shall leave until last, but they are prepared.’

‘Be ready. If we beat this attack back, we shall need to depart immediately, because orks will come quickly to any rumour of battle. Do you understand?’

‘I understand.’ She followed Brusc’s gaze, her eyes lighting on Marcomar as he made himself ready. He carefully removed his weapon’s dust cover, and was beginning the rituals of preparation.

‘You have other things on your mind, I see,’ she said, the gentlest words she had spoken to Brusc.

‘His master fell six days ago. We were on long range patrol for our crusade before we were recalled, and were ambushed. We slaughtered them all, but I lost two brothers, adding to three already fallen. It is hard on the novitiates, when their knight is slain,’ said Brusc quietly. ‘But he has taken it especially badly, and it will go against him. There is no room for fear or shock in the Adeptus Astartes. Marcomar’s failure will be a further loss that will be difficult to bear.’

‘Is he certain to fail? I have seen the meekest sister made a tigress in battle, brother, but it takes time. Will another take on his training?’

Brusc shrugged, a mighty movement that set his pauldrons shifting like troubled mountains. ‘It is not a certainty, we see it as a personal failing to allow our knight to fall. There is little the novitiate can do to protect their masters in most cases – they are not full brothers after all – but even so,

some of the initiates regard it as a stain on the squire's honour if they do not perish with their knight, even though they should know better.' He regarded the morose novitiate, appraising his actions. 'And there will be plenty of masterless boys come the end of this war, that is certain.'

He looked out at the desert. Sister Rosa started to speak, but Brusc raised a hand, silencing her. His helmet lenses whirred as they focused on something beyond the reach of human sight.

'Dust plumes,' he said. 'They are coming. They are coming!' he shouted, his voice blaring from his vox-grille. 'Stand ready!'

The orks came at them as the sun entered the last quarter of the day. A solid wall of flesh marching over the wastes, their bright totems were caked in dust, whatever boasts they proclaimed lost beneath Armageddon's grey coat. In the dun light of late afternoon they appeared as an army of ghosts out of the haze, fanged and terrible. Their chanting was a throbbing roar. Already the crackle and pop of weapons fire rang out. Too far away to hit the defenders of the hospital, they fired into the air from excitement. A handful of light buggies and bikes rushed ceaselessly back and forth in front of the horde, throwing up plumes of ash.

'Well,' said Osric. 'No tanks. That's something. At least you won't miss, novitiates.' He had replaced his helmet on his head, and spoke to both neophytes through the vox. Marcomar aside, the Black Templars stood together: Sunno, Brusc, Osric and Doneal. All had their weapons in hand – bolt pistol and chainsword for the initiates, while Doneal carried a pistol the same as his masters, but in his off hand he held a great combat knife the length of a man's thighbone.

'Nor will you, Osric,' said Brusc. 'Don't listen to him, he's the worst shot in the crusade.'

'You do know, young one, that Sword Brother Brusc here was my knight and I his squire? The pupil learns as much as he can from the master,' said Osric. 'In the matter of marksmanship, I learned only as much as I could.'

'Truly?' asked Doneal.

'You seem surprised boy, but we all have been what you are now. Besides, it was a long time ago, when our leader here had a prettier face.'

'War demands not beauty, but slaughter,' said Brusc.

'Ah, but there is art in war. Art indeed. Any art is beautiful, especially that

of death.’

‘Praise be, brother,’ said Sunno.

‘We shall pray,’ Brusc said, without preamble. Together, the Space Marines knelt in the dust, crossing their arms and weapons over their chests, bowing their heads. Marcomar followed suit on the platform of the comms tower.

‘Lead us, brother,’ said Osric. No trace of levity was in his voice.

When Brusc spoke next, he did so loudly and clearly through his helmet vox. The men on the defence line looked back over their shoulders away from the foe. They ceased to finger their weapons so nervously. Many of them dropped their heads, and muttered prayers of their own; the rites of the Adeptus Astartes were strange to them.

‘Emperor! Lord of all Mankind, he who came among the weakling children of Terra and stood against the terrors of an uncaring universe. Emperor! We, the sons of Your son, gene-forged to Your design, kneel here in the dust of this far-flung world, far from Your throne. Emperor! We ask not for Your mercy, or for Your protection. We do not ask for Your favour save this: that we fight with all the strength You saw fit to bestow upon us, and in doing so further the victory of Your most holy war, the crusade that never ends. Guide our arms, guide our aim, see that we make good count of the foe so that fewer horrors might assail mankind, Your servants, and stand in the way of Your mastery of the stars! We five, few that we are, so make this oath: That we shall not falter.’

‘That we shall not falter,’ repeated the others.

‘That we shall not fail.’

‘That we shall not fail,’ the response came.

‘That we shall not bring dishonour unto you.’

‘No dishonour! This we swear!’ they all shouted.

Brusc rose to his feet. He held aloft his chainsword and turned on the spot, showing the weapon to everyone around him. The wind, reduced to little more than a hot breath, stirred his dirty surcoat and the fresh oath papers attached to his armour. ‘No pity! No remorse! No fear!’ he roared.

This time, the response issued from everyone within the compound.

He nodded to his followers. They stood.

‘It is time we were about our business,’ he said.

The rattle of chains oath-chains being attached to sword hilt and pistol butt

was the Black Templars' response.

A hundred metres away to the left, on the far side of the compound, heavy bolters chattered. Explosions rumbled as the ork outriders were caught.

Osric raised his bolt pistol and took aim. The orks were a way off yet, well out of range of his pistol, yet he picked a target, locked his arm, held it steady and waited.

It was an inevitability that the orks would come over the line. They were many, and the men of Jopal of insufficient numbers to keep them back by weight of fire alone.

Nevertheless, many greenskins fell, burned by lasfire before the orks breached the walls. They came through in three places more or less simultaneously. The indentured men of Jopal reeled from this assault, shocked by the orks' brutality and their cunningly coordinated attack.

Brusc found little new. He had fought the orks many times. There were not the unthinking brutes propaganda would have the men of the Astra Militarum believe. He and his brothers separated and went to the breaches, engaging the orks hand to hand. Relieved, the lesser men fell back to barricades in the streets. For a time, Brusc fought alone. Orks roared and hurled themselves at him. The power of their blows rocked him on his feet, but he found tranquillity there in the heat of the melee, and he attained a higher level of intimacy with the Lord of Man through these most holy rites of battle.

He dispatched an opponent with a backwards thrust through the neck. The ork's head juddered as his chainsword's teeth ground their way through its spine. A twisting jerk freed the blade from the neck. The ork's head came with it. The body collapsed to its knees, fountaining dark red blood all over Brusc. Then the Jopali had their position and new firing solutions. They opened up, felling the last of the orks at Brusc's breach. He searched for new targets, but found none.

Brusc barely had time to draw breath when a desperate cry went up over the vox, a signifier in Brusc's helm indicating it came from one of the human officers. If it was Ghaskar, he could not tell for its panicked thickness. 'Keep them away from the transports! Keep them away!'

He turned his back on the defence wall, where the next wave of screaming xenos savages was being gunned down by disciplined lasfire, and looked to

the centre of the compound.

Half a dozen leader-orks had forced their way to the very heart of the hospital; giants clad in hissing suits of armour. Fifteen, perhaps more, of the lesser kind loped alongside them, their huge rifles spitting fire. In the midst of them all went one even greater, a mighty ork-king, half Brusc's height again. Bright yellow patterned with black showed through the dust and ash caking its suit. The armour encased it almost completely, covering its head, its eyes protected by thick lenses of green glass and the jaw hidden behind a serrated metal bevoir cast in the shape of a jaw. Only the joints were their weakness. Brusc's heart soared at the sight of it.

'Here is a foe! Here is honour! Black Templars, to me!'

Without waiting for his men, Brusc ran down the avenue toward the leader orks as they advanced on the trucks. The orks did not fire upon the vehicles, slaughtering only the men. Providence was with humanity – plunder was the orks' intent. As orks approached the silent *Cataphraxes*, the black knights of Dorn crashed into the guard with a noise like thunder. Coming from three directions, they barged their way through the lesser creatures by dint of strength alone, crushing and slashing them down. Their bolt pistols sang the clamorous hymns of death until their ammunition was spent and the weapons were dropped to swing by their lanyards, trailing smoke like censers from glowing barrels.

This was prayer for the Black Templars. War was their worship, the battlefield their temple. Hymns ringing from their vox-grilles, they gripped their chainswords two handed and hewed at the foe. Sunno accounted for two of the guard creatures, ducking below their ponderously swinging arms to despatch them one after the other with artful blows – the first to the neck, the second gutted and beheaded as it fell forward. The snap of Marcomar's sniper rifle was the call of retribution upon the wind – pure and clean it cut through the brutish barks of orkish gunfire, felling one after another of the lighter armoured creatures. Brusc found himself duelling with a pair of giants. Both his hearts pumped hard, flooding his system with the blessings of the Emperor. Time slowed, and he sang the Hymn of Hate to the beat of his blows.

Soon the majority of the orks lay dead, leaking blood and machine fluids into the greedy ash. Over their slumped forms Brusc caught sight of Osric. Alone he had gone to fight with the ork-king. Alone, he had fallen into

peril. The ork had Osric in one massive claw, the scissor blades crushing the armour of his forearm. Osric dangled, his battleplate breached in three places. He swung his legs in fruitless kicks at the ork, his curses loud in Brusc's ear pieces.

The teeth-track of Brusc's sword was clogged with tough ork flesh. The motor whined dangerously, smoke issuing from its exhaust. He released its trigger before it burned out, unclipped its lanyard and flung the weapon aside with a prayer of apology. As he ran to Osric's aid he slammed home a fresh magazine into his bolt pistol. By the time he had snatched his combat blade from its sheath, his armour-aided legs were pushing him speedily at the king.

Osric gave up trying to free his arm and reached for a grenade. Brusc launched himself through the air, smashing into the scrap armour of the ork-king. The plangence of their meeting was the voice of a bell in some temple of belligerence. The ork staggered. With surprising speed it swung round, hurling Osric at Brusc's head. The sword brother ducked, firing as he did. Osric hit a prefab's wall, crumpling it and streaking it with his blood as he fell to the ground. Brusc's bolts sparked off the ork-king's armour or exploded without effect on the surface. One found an unprotected spot. When it blew, gobbets of flesh rained outwards, but the ork was not slowed. Whatever pain it felt only served to stoke its fury, and it came at Brusc fast, the crude pistons on its warsuit hissing gas.

Brusc dodged a blow, the ork's giant shears clanging shut inches from his helm's muzzle. He riposted with his knife, driving it at the ork's forearm, seeking the gap at the elbow where dirty green skin was visible. The ork was too agile, the knife hit the armour. The plating on the lord shamed a tank. Brusc's thrust gouged a bright silver streak in the metal, peeling away a long curl of swarf, but no more than that. The ork backhanded him, swinging its claw-clad fist into his chest. Brusc flew backwards, alarm signals peeping in his helmet as he crashed to the floor. His visor display jumped, the static of it conspiring with the blood running down over his lenses to limit his vision. The ork was on him again, reaching for him. Then it had him, one shear about his neck, the other around his thighs. Roaring its triumph, the ork-king lofted him upwards, holding its trophy over its head for all his slaves to see.

'Forgive me, Emperor, when we meet,' shouted Brusc, 'for I have spilled

too little blood in your name.’

The expected pressure, the crushing of metal and flesh, never came. The ork-king had stopped in his tracks. Brusc twisted around in its grasp, his battleplate squealing against the claw’s razored edges.

The ork’s face was still twisted in triumph, the great bucket jaw of the armour swung open to roar, but behind the metal his tongue lolled from his teeth. A twist of white smoke rose coyly from its open mouth, the only sign of the sniper shot that had slain it. Its armour held its corpse in position. It toppled slowly over backwards with Brusc still trapped in its claws.

‘Forgive me, my lord,’ said Marcomar over the vox. ‘I had to wait until opportunity presented itself.’

There was a steeliness in his voice that had been lacking before.

‘Then you have had your vengeance, novitiate,’ said Brusc.

‘Indeed. Praise be.’

In that moment, Brusc knew Marcomar would not fail after all.

By the time he had extricated himself from the dead warlord’s grasp, the orks were in flight. Their king slain and his cohorts fallen, the lesser orks broke and ran, leaving many of their dead upon the field. Bright laser light and heavy bolter shells slew more as the fled, the surviving men of Jopal jeering at their rout. The Black Templars stayed with the haulers. Sunno and Doneal worked in tandem, despatching stragglers and wounded xenos. Doneal was savage and skilled. He would make a fine battle-brother.

Only when he was sure that the battle was finished did Brusc go to Osric’s side.

Osric lay with his legs out. He had managed to haul himself into a sitting position, so that his powerplant rested on the wall, but had got no further. The gashes in his armour sparked. Red meat was revealed beneath.

‘That was foolish brother.’ Brusc switched his flickering helm display around, bringing up the vital signs of his ex-pupil and friend as he knelt at the younger Space Marine’s side. Both heartbeats were weak, and growing weaker. Osric’s armour was flooding his body with drugs from its pharmacopeia, but his wounds were deep and neither medicament nor his body’s innate gifts could stem the tide of blood. Bright crimson poured from the rents in Osric’s plate, staining the ground around him; far too much of it.

‘I was trying to impress you, brother,’ said Osric. He attempted a laugh,

but it gurgled horribly and became a bubbling cough. It took a moment for him to recover. ‘Perhaps if I had taken his head,’ he gasped, ‘then you would not have hesitated to present me in the Circle of Honour.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Brusc. ‘But his death bought honour for Marcomar instead.’

‘All is not lost then,’ said Osric. ‘You must give him further chance. I would take him to squire myself, if I do not die.’

‘Lie still, do not speak. You have been grievously wounded.’ Brusc spoke softly. He rested his hand on Osric’s helm, an echo of a parent touching the brow of a sick child. The brothers were all the family any of them would ever know, the only blood.

Osric raised a wavering hand and gripped Brusc’s forearm. ‘I fought well, do not deny me that.’

‘You fought well, my friend.’

Brusc stood, Osric’s enfeebled hand skidded from his battleplate to lie curled on the stained earth. His head lolled. Orderlies and sisters from Sister Rosa’s station were running to the fallen Space Marine. They openly wept to see an angel of their god thusly cast down.

Sister Rosa was with them, bloodied, but still whole. ‘We shall do what we can for him, brother,’ she said.

Brusc shrugged as if it mattered not if they did or did not, although it mattered to him a great deal. He pointed at the spreading pool beneath Osric. The sand was saturated. ‘Witness, sister! It is as you said, there is only blood. We all bleed it, mighty and meek, high and lowly. The blood of the faithful waters the earth of every Imperial world, as is only right. Remember him. Remember the blood he has shed for you.’

The orderlies struggled to move Osric’s armoured body onto a stretcher that was far too short for his height. Brusc watched dispassionately. Losing-patience with them, Rosa snapped and sent for medical servitors. ‘Quickly now! He is dying!’

In Brusc’s helmet, Osric’s vital signs became erratic. It would not be long now.

‘Do not leave his body. He has one more service to render.’

‘Yes, brother,’ said Sister Rosa.

He stared down at his dying brother. ‘See that you are ready to depart, sister. The orks will return. We leave in ten minutes.’

Without looking back, he strode toward *Cataphraxes*.

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SEASON OF SHADOWS

GUY HALEY

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The Season of Fire abated. The last plumes of ash coughed from Armageddon’s volcanoes. Dying winds hurried the season’s final storms to stillness. Searing heat gave way as the world was plunged into a short, volcanic winter. At Armageddon’s poles, dirty snow fell.

The Season of Shadows had begun.

In peaceful times this cessation of the storms was a respite for men. The season was well named, for the land was dark and cool. It was a time for quiet doings, although thunderous industry never ceased. This year was different; the choking ash would be missed. As soon as the skies began to clear, the fires of war rekindled. Orks came out from their hiding places and marched upon the hives of Armageddon once more.

‘Another charge brother! Quickly!’

In a twilight-noon born of ash the shrouded sun smouldered upon a field-hospital, recently attacked and soon to be abandoned. Within its broken confines Black Templars Space Marines worked with haste.

Sword Brother Brusc, the leader of this much depleted reconnaissance group not long on Armageddon, tossed a bulky demo pack at Brother Sunno as easily as a normal man might throw an egg. Sunno grabbed it from the air and slapped it onto the leg of the comms tower. Made redundant by the shattering of the world’s data network, the tower was to be felled just the same, as insisted upon by Adeptus Astartes thoroughness.

A fitful wind moaned through tension cables, wrapping short-lived veils of dust around support struts. Brusc glanced skyward. The sun was a round circle, a hole punched in dark cloth. Brighter than in the storms of the

previous day, still it could be stared at with unshielded eyes.

Sunno's neophyte, Doneal, signalled from a roof on the other side of the compound, hand in the air and forefinger describing a circle.

'That's the last, brother,' Sunno said, dragging Brusc's attention from the dark skies. 'Doneal and Marcomar are done.'

'Good. We shall leave nothing for the orks,' said Brusc, his voice projecting from his helmet's vox-grille.

'To *Cataphraxes* then,' said Sunno.

'Immediately. Neophytes, rejoin us.'

'Yes, my lord,' the two young Space Marines said in unison.

The field hospital heaved with activity. Ork corpses from the recent assault lay along every road. Dying men screamed. Shouting squads of Jopal Indentured hurried about, stripping equipment from the prefabricatums and the dead, moving debris from the evacuation's path. Machine noise roared high periodically, drowning out the voices of men. Earth movers grumbled, shunting aside squealing piles of metal. In the marshalling yard, tanks puttered as their drivers ran engines gently to clear them of dust.

This lone subgroup of the Black Templars Ash Wastes Crusade gathered before their Rhino, *Cataphraxes*.

'How long until they come, my lords?' asked Doneal.

'Not long, boy,' said Sunno. 'Not long.'

'At least the clear skies are holding.'

Brusc shot the boy a dark look. Ordinarily light of spirit, Brusc was not currently disposed to optimism. 'The Season of Shadows is yet to begin in earnest. It might not last,' he said. He looked up again, searching for something the others could not see. 'In truth we are at the mercy of the weather, whatever it does.'

Doneal wordlessly asked for clarification.

'Ash storms might mask us as easily as they could kill us, neophyte,' said Sunno. 'When our dust plumes go skyward, the orks can see us from miles away.'

Brusc acknowledged Sunno's statement with a noise in his throat.

The Black Templars Rhino *Cataphraxes* waited at the mouth of the complex's central square, black armour rubbed down to its undercoat by the fury of Armageddon's abrasive winds. A pintle-mounted storm bolter topped its front.

Inside his blank-faced Crusader helm, Sunno smiled. ‘*Cataphraxes*’s engine is cold, but he is ready, brother. Can you feel his anticipation?’

‘I cannot,’ said Brusc. ‘I do not share your affinity for the machine’s soul.’

‘Such a shame, brother. His is a holy soul, vengeful. He hears news of Osric’s fall and wishes to avenge his brother.’

Osric had fallen in battle with the orks. He had been Brusc’s last neophyte before he won through to the Sword Brethren. He had been Brusc’s friend.

Seven large haulers were behind the tank, nose to tail in a convoy line wrapped round all sides of the hospital’s central square. Double-decker tractor units provided motive power. Their armoured cabs were equipped with stacked pairs of ball-mounted heavy stubbers. Each tractor unit was motivated by six double tyres as tall as men. Massive, articulated trailers already loaded with a container apiece waited behind them. These were built to the same basic standard template construct pattern as the prefabricatums. Had they time to properly dismantle the hospital then the wards would have been stacked atop the containers, fitting together like child’s construction bricks, but there was no time, and the hospital was to be destroyed.

Medicae orderlies and sisters hospitaller were coming out of the emptying wards, carrying the last, most seriously wounded patients aboard. Brusc wondered which truck carried Osric’s body.

‘Brother Sunno, go to *Cataphraxes*,’ he ordered. ‘Neophyte Doneal, you are to remain with your master. Man *Cataphraxes*’s armament. Keep your eyes sharp.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Neophyte Marcomar, you have no master. Until you are chosen again you will remain with me.’

The neophyte fell in behind him silently. He had lost his own knight several days before the squad had come upon the hospital, and remained withdrawn.

‘You have replaced your rifle’s dust cover,’ Brusc said approvingly.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Good. A warrior should guard his wargear with his life. Honour your weapons the way you honour the Emperor, and both will shield you.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

They went to the administration building, a prefabricatum identical to all

the others, marked out only by the wind-scoured image of a cracked chalice emblazoned upon the side.

The doors to the unit were open. Sister Rosa, administratrix of the hospital, directed her staff. She was framed in the building's interior light, bright in the grim noon.

'We are ready,' said Brusc.

'As are we,' said Sister Rosa. Her rad-marked face was harried, features drawn with stress and lack of sleep. 'There are seven we cannot move. They will suffer if we try.'

'Do you wish us to administer mercy?'

'We do not need you to perform our duties for us, brother. My sisters do so now.'

'Do they die well?'

'They do, brother,' said Sister Rosa.

Brusc shifted, looked over his shoulder at the men and women striving to get everything done. 'That is good,' he said eventually. 'Record their names and we will honour them in our prayers. They do not die in battle, but their sacrifice is no less noble.'

An Imperial Guard officer came into the square, five squads jogging behind him with purpose. He halted and his men formed up behind him. Not one of the squads was at full strength. Most of the soldiers bore minor wounds. All of them were tired. They stood tall nonetheless.

'Lieutenant Ghaskar,' said Brusc.

Ghaskar bowed. 'My lord. We are prepared. All we wait for is your word.'

'Then you have it,' said Brusc.

Ghaskar yelled orders in his odd Gothic dialect. His men broke from attention, some running for the tractor cabs, the rest running for ladders attached to the sides of the trailers.

Around the top of each container was a low rail, part of the locking mechanism of the stacking system, scant protection for the Jopali. The men jammed themselves against these, lying flat, guns pointing out all round. The wiser ones lashed ropes around their ankles and rails then urged the less experienced to do the same.

'Sister Rosa,' said Brusc. 'We shall ride the lead hauler. My brothers will watch from the front. We will do all we can to ensure that as many as possible can survive.'

‘I will be praying for us all,’ she said.

Brusc marched back to the Rhino. The men atop the trucks nodded at him, warrior to warrior, or worshipfully made the Jopali’s triple version of the aquila, each according to his temperament.

‘Wait here,’ he said to Marcomar.

As Brusc walked up the ramp into the Rhino, Sunno spoke to him over his shoulder through the open door of the driver’s cab. He had taken his helmet off, a direct line ran from his spinal interface socket into the tank.

‘I am in communion with *Cataphraxes*, brother. We pray together.’

‘My bolter,’ explained Brusc. ‘Some range may be advantageous here.’ He retrieved the weapon from the rack at the forward right of the compartment, but did not remove his bloodied chainsword or bolt pistol from his waist, he would need all his holy tools before the day was out. He checked the Rhino’s augur suite. ‘No sign of them,’ said Brusc. ‘The Emperor may yet be with us.’

He collected Marcomar and headed for the lead hauler. As he mounted the ladder the men above fell silent. The truck trailer rocked as he climbed. Once on the roof, he took one step to the centre and mag-locked his boots to the metal.

There were six Jopali on top of the truck. Lying at his feet they looked like children. Two of them made obeisance to him, bowing repeatedly and pressing their heads to metal.

‘Stop,’ said Brusc. ‘Do not bow to us.’

‘But you are the Angels of Death!’ said one. He had his goggles off, exposing a strip of dark skin between his helmet and scarf. His eyes were luminously white in his dirty face.

‘We are the instruments of the Emperor. We are not gods. Do not bow to me,’ said Brusc gruffly.

Marcomar took up station behind the Sword Brother, lying as low as his physique and carapace armour would allow. He unwrapped his sniper rifle.

‘Brother Sunno, beseech *Cataphraxes* to take us from here,’ Brusc voxed.

‘*Yes, brother*.’

A second later *Cataphraxes*’s engine roared into life. The shouting in the camp became frantic. Stragglers scrambled into the side and rear doors of the containers. Six muffled bolt shots sounded from inside the complex. Six Adepta Sororitas Combat-Medicae, cowled and clad in light power armour,

came walking slowly out from the buildings. Their songs of loss were drowned out by igniting engines as one by one the tractor units started up, making a toneless choir of their own. The heavy stink of burning hydrocarbons washed back from their tall exhausts, the kind that, were Brusc's air not filtered by his helmet, would have coated his throat with greasy particulates.

Brusc surveyed the camp. Smoke rose from a couple of burning prefabricatums torched by the greenskins. Orks lay where they had fallen. There were a great many of them. Brusc was impressed by the Jopali's mettle.

The few troopers remaining outside the trucks were throwing down the barricades on the road leading to the gate. Vox chatter between the Jopali increased as roll calls were undertaken. Doors slammed.

Sister Rosa was the last to leave the administratum building. She looked up at Brusc standing upon the roof, her gaze piercing. Both of them were scarred. She by radiation burns gained in the course of their duties, he from battle. Both of them served, in their own way. Brusc acknowledged her with a nod.

'All are aboard,' Ghaskar notified him. 'We may depart when you command, my lord.'

'Then may the Emperor guide us all through storm and foe to safe harbour.' Brusc spoke grimly. His usual humour was absent; he could not think joyous thoughts while Osric lay dead. He closed his eyes and prayed silently.

Emperor, I would gladly have left fifty lesser men here dead, if Osric could have lived. I should not feel this way, but I do. Have mercy on me that I recognise it, though I cannot prevent my feeling it.

A final door slammed. Sister Rosa was reported aboard.

'Brother Sunno, lead us out.'

Cataphraxes gave a satisfied roar and rumbled forward, pushing the remnants of barricades aside, crushing dead orks and dead men alike into pulp underneath its treads.

Brusc lurched as the truck set off. Away to the west side of the camp dust swirled around the Jopali's transports, making their way around the perimeter road to the gate – four Chimeras, a Taurox Prime command tank, and a Salamander Scout, its open compartment covered by a taut tarpaulin.

Sunno drove *Cataphraxes* right through the flimsy gates, chain-link wire on a tube-steel frame. They leapt and quivered under the tank like a dying thing, chinking as the following trucks rode over them.

On the plain before the camp the Chimeras fell in either side of the column. The Taurox fell back, trailing the last truck. Orders crackled from Ghaskar, and the Salamander leapt forward, sending twin tails of dust high into the air.

All around the hospital, ork corpses were black shadows on the ashy sand.

'There is no sign of a single living greenskin,' said Ghaskar.

'I see nothing either,' said Sunno. 'Our escape has gone unnoticed.'

'Remain vigilant,' said Brusc. 'Now we are underway, we are at risk from marauders. There are many operating in this area now that the storms are passing.' He glanced up at the sky. 'I had hoped the storms would return, to mask our passing, but it appears not to be so. The Season of Fire has spent its fury.'

He watched the hospital recede. A detonation rune burned in his visor display.

A difficult choice, he thought. Leave it standing and the greenskins will be enriched. Destroy it, and signal that we are leaving.

The convoy growled up over a low rise, turning to the west to skirt a field of ash dunes. The wind was strong there, sending sheets of dust from the dune's scimitar-ridges.

When they were a couple of kilometres distant and the compound was receding into the haze, Brusc detonated the demolition charges. Fire leapt up from every part of the complex, bursting apart the prefabricatums and lifting their sheeting into the air. They caught the wind, blowing off to the west as if following the convoy. The sounds of the detonation reached Brusc a half second later, a series of puny firecracker pops and rippling metallic crashes.

He watched the field hospital burn until it was lost to the undifferentiated landscapes of the Ash Wastes.

The convoy rumbled onward unopposed. The winds rose and fell, sometimes choking the air with fine ash so that visibility dropped to nothing. The great storms of the Season of Fire were nearly done. The wind dropped, the curtains of ash parting to reveal a parched, dead landscape.

Regarding the woeful state of Armageddon, mankind had much to answer for. There were abandoned facilities poking from smooth-sided dunes, expanses of sand garishly stained by industrial by-products, roads that went nowhere and hills cleaved in two – all their worth was burrowed out of them, the hints of giant pits in the ground flooded now with ash. Armageddon had never been a gentle world; its yearly volcanic tantrums were proof of that.

Consequently there were few signs of life of any kind. Copses of stumpy vennenum marked dust-drowned oases. Thickets of dead men's fingers crowded the leeward slopes of stony hills, as tangled as briars. Sometimes things scuttled within them, but the movements were those of small vermin and rapidly gone.

The signs of war were everywhere they cared to look. Columns of smoke rose on the horizon, and leagues-distant artillery duels rumbled. Contrails streaked the glowering sky. They passed through a field of rusting tank shells, leftovers from the battles of an earlier age. War was all about them yet they were alone.

For a hot day and freezing night the convoy headed west. Twice they stopped so that the Jopali might change shifts, swapping from cab to roof and back again. At night they dozed at their stations. Throughout it all, Brusc and Marcomar maintained an unsleeping vigilance. Only infrequently did he check in with Sunno or Lieutenant Ghaskar.

As a second dawn stained the grey-ash deserts a hostile vermillion, they stopped for a third time. Ghaskar, Brusc and Sunno held a council of war via vox.

'There's a dead valley ahead, brother,' said Sunno. 'Dry river bed, a good natural road. Danger of ambush, though. Topographical data says it runs right down to the Mortis river. Follow that, and we'll be at the Helsreach perimeter in another twenty hours.'

'There are supply convoys and relief columns running up and down the river highway in great numbers,' said Ghaskar. 'We would be safe there, back under the protection of Imperial forces.'

'He's right about that, brother,' said Sunno. 'But we might not survive to get there. The valley's a prime ambush spot. We will have nearly one hundred kilometres to drive before we hit Imperial pickets.'

'Where are the enemy?' asked Brusc. 'Have we had any sign?'

‘Long range vox is still dead, brother. The orks have destroyed all communications infrastructure out here,’ said Sunno. ‘We are alone. The Emperor is too occupied with greater questions on this world to pay especial attention to us.’

‘Salamander Scout reports no sign of xenos activity,’ said Ghaskar.

‘They are still reporting in?’ asked Brusc.

‘Yes, with admirable efficiency, my lord,’ said Ghaskar. Brusc was growing to like the lieutenant, there was nothing in Ghaskar’s tone that suggested he felt he deserved praise for his Scout crew’s diligence.

‘It is your decision, brother,’ said Sunno.

‘You would advise against such a route ordinarily, Brother Sunno,’ said Brusc.

Sunno was a veteran of many wars, dangerously jaded in Brusc’s opinion, even though he was much younger than the ancient Sword Brother. ‘You know the heart of your brother well. But not this time – we are running out of options. How long can we drive around this Emperor-forsaken wasteland without being discovered? It is a short dash and our other choices are poor. The land either side of the valley is too broken for the haulers. We would have to travel three hundred kilometres to the south, directly to the coast, and take our chances there.’

‘My men will fight to their last,’ said Ghaskar. ‘All you must do, my lord, is give the word.’

‘It will not come to that,’ said Brusc.

Once more, he thought, the decision falls to me. The last time, Osric fell. The thought caused his shoulders to twitch involuntarily.

My laughter will be a long time in returning, he thought. So many of us have died, and yet I remain? Why, O Emperor? What are your plans for me?

‘Brother?’ prompted Sunno. ‘What are your orders?’

Brusc looked ahead. The air had grown hazy again. On the foreshortened horizon, he could make out a bar of caramel hills. A shadow intimated a cleft in the barrier, surely the river valley. He called up overlays from his suit’s logic engine that confirmed this.

Sunno was correct. This would be their last moment of peace.

‘We go on,’ he said.

An hour later, the Salamander failed to make its routine notification call.

‘Here they come!’ voxed Sunno.

Dozens of light vehicles came leaping over the dunes’ ridges. Ork attack buggies, half-tracks, junkers – all equipped with heavy weapons, no two the same. Bikes, ridden by wild-eyed monsters, formed a surging arrowhead around them that constantly threatened to break apart. Four light transports, bursting with xenos, came behind. They were so caked in dust and ash that it was impossible to see which sub-grouping they belonged to. Brusc suspected speed cultists, but ultimately it did not matter.

‘Ignore the bikes, and prioritise the transports,’ he ordered the others.

The orks were on them quickly, driving at reckless speed. He snapped off a bolt, catching an ork biker square in the chest. Its ribcage exploded, making it flop like a gutted fish. The bike continued on for a dozen metres, before falling and tumbling over and over in a ball of scattering scrap. Cackling ork outriders skidded around it, bike engines howling. They leaned over in the saddle, firing pistols. The Jopali replied, ruby las-light stabbing out from cabs and containers. The socket stubbers on the cabs rattled. The Chimeras either side of the convoy belted out multi-laser and heavy bolter-rounds, while Doneal covered the front of the convoy with *Cataphraxes*’s storm bolter, and the Taurox covered the rear.

An ork bike went hurtling away from the line of trucks, rearing up as it hit the valley sides. Another exploded. But the riverbed was rough, the orks fast, and many of the Imperial shots went wide.

A line of heavy calibre solid shot stitched holes along the top of Brusc’s trailer, punching through the thin sheet metal. The bullets tracked upwards, streaking off Brusc’s armour. The Jopali were not so lucky. One was kneeling to get a better aim. He was caught in the shoulder and sent screaming from the rooftop. Another, lying flat, was pierced by bullets coming from below. He jerked twice, his lasgun clattering over the side of the truck. His body slid after it, dangling from his safety rope.

The ork gunner snarled, bashing his driver on the head. He gestured at Brusc. The buggy wobbled as the driver warded off the gunner’s blows and glanced up to see what his comrade was so angry about.

‘You will make no trophy of me,’ said Brusc. He levelled his boltgun. His first shot missed, his aim spoiled by the hauler’s sudden jolting. His second went true, decapitating the driver. The headless corpse slumped over the steering wheel, sending it caroming away from the convoy. It slammed into

the valley side. The gunner recovered, and traversed his gun for a parting shot. He never made it, falling dead over his own weapon, felled by a sniper rifle.

‘A good shot, Marcomar,’ said Brusc.

The orks pursued undaunted. More bikes came out of the hills to run alongside the convoy, looping far out so that they could come at the trucks again and again with guns spitting. There were so many now that they were swirling around the giant trucks like flies around cattle. Three buggies and a half-track were harrying the last hauler but one, riddling the sides of the trailer with holes. It drove on, but Brusc doubted there would be anyone left living within. The Taurox Prime rearguard cleared wide areas of the dead river of hostiles, only for them to flood back.

Two of the rickety transports swooped down on a Chimera, chased by a couple of buggies. The tank’s turret tracked round, shooting a barrage of fire from its multilaser, and a brave gunner added to the weight of fire with the vehicle’s pintle stubber. A fusillade of rockets hammered into the human tank. Poorly fashioned, most clanged off the armour without detonating, but one flew true and exploded against the Chimera’s turret. The crewman was obliterated, the turret lifted half off its mount. The buggies closed in on the wounded vehicle.

One buggy went cartwheeling away, its tyres blown out. Another of the transports exploded in an orange fireball, destroyed by shots from the trailing Chimera, but the other drew alongside, easily keeping pace. A dozen orks were crammed into it, hanging from handholds along the outside. A broad gangplank crashed down, hooks on the end catching on the tank’s fittings. Ball-mounted lasguns along the side blasted at the xenos, but the gangplank was in the way and they could draw no good lines of fire. With a war cry Brusc could hear over the racket of battle, the orks clambering onto the tank, shoving at each other so hard in their eagerness that one tumbled from the locked vehicles. The Chimera swerved from side to side, trying to shake the orks off, but they only laughed at such entertainment. Within seconds, they had the upper hatch up and were slaughtering every man inside. The linked Chimera and buggy stopped, the orks dancing madly on their prize.

‘How much further, Brother Sunno?’ asked Brusc.

‘Another seventy kilometres until we reach the outermost Imperial line.

No guarantee there'll be anything there to greet us, Sword Brother. I'm getting nothing on the vox.'

Brusc blasted an ork from the back of a buggy. The roaring of ork engines was deafening. Black smoke billowed around the trucks.

'My lord!' cried a man of Jopal. He pointed to the south side of the valley.

Seven more trucks laden with orks were coming down the slope, swelling the number of greenskins. Orks swinging grappling irons and the boarding ramps held high on both sides of all the trucks left no doubt in Brusc's mind as to their intentions. In the Rhino's cupola, Doneal swung round and gunned for them with *Cataphraxes*'s storm bolter. His aim was good: the bolts raking across the bed of one of the trucks, slaughtering orks. Brusc added his fire, killing more. Marcomar slew a driver, sending a truck into a swerve that toppled it, spilling orks all over the valley floor. Others were too well protected and his las-shots were halted by iron plating.

'Brother!' warned Marcomar.

A buggy was driving right by the hauler that followed Brusc's. The tractor unit's heavy stubbers could not reduce their elevation enough, their bullets raising tracks in the desert a good metre out from the buggy. Men gesticulated, their shouts inaudible as they leaned out from the container roof. One slipped and fell, hanging helplessly by his ankle cord. Another two stood to help him and were shot down. Brusc switched targets, targeting the buggy. He missed twice, a third round bringing a plume of steam from the buggy's engine block to no noticeable effect.

Its gunner had abandoned his gun. He reached down. When he stood upright he held a large bomb.

A daring jink from the driver brought the buggy between the two haulers. The gunner attached the bomb to the radiator grille of the tractor unit. The driver of the hauler accelerated, trying to crush them, but with a flurry of obscene gestures from the gunner the buggy was away.

'Get down!' Brusc screamed.

To the credit of the driver of the second hauler, he realised his fate and turned sharply, taking the vehicle out of the convoy. A selfless move, but too late.

The bomb exploded, hollowing out the tractor unit. It bounced as it came to a halt, jackknifing into the path of the remaining north flank Chimera. The tank ran into it at speed, clanging to a sudden stop against the flaming

wreck. The trailer detached, rolling over the towing bed of the tractor, and reared up. Men flew from it, helpless as ragdolls. It twisted, carried forwards by its own momentum, to land diagonally across the river bed.

The third hauler ploughed into it, sending men skidding off its roof. The stricken vehicles were immediately assaulted. The amount of return fire from them was inadequate. Brusc held his breath, but the other haulers avoided the smash, swerving around the wreckage. A small measure of retribution was earned when one ran over a careless buggy, crushing it under massive wheels. The Taurox gunned down a good number of the orks attacking the survivors as it sped by.

‘Do not stop! Drive on! Drive on!’ ordered Ghaskar. ‘If we stay to aid our comrades, we shall all die!’

‘We lost two,’ said Brusc to Sunno.

A gleeful howling drew his attention. Two of the fresh ork trucks had survived and were running hard by his trailer. Orks slammed hooked lines into the thin sides of the container, catching the access ladders with others, and swarmed up onto the roof.

They were quick, roaring with battle lust. Two were dropped by lasgun shots and fell back, knocking another ork from his purchase, then the rest were on the roof. The four remaining men of Jopal were dead before Brusc could shout at them to get behind him. Marcomar went on as if nothing were happening, coolly sniping high-value targets away from the truck. Commendable, thought Brusc.

Brusc dropped his boltgun. It clattered on the metal, skittering across the bouncing roof. His chainsword and bolt pistol were in his hands in an instant. He had no time to attach their lanyard chains to his wrists.

‘No pity. No remorse. No fear!’ bellowed Brusc. In truth, there was no need for such words; he could feel none of these things for the greenskins, they were vermin to be slaughtered. His hatred of them constricted his throat, strangling his battle-hymns. He stood firm, locked to the roof, as the orks attacked.

The first died from a bolt-round to its thick skull. The second fell screaming from the roof, holding its entrails into its belly. Marcomar drew his bolt pistol, shooting down orks trying to crawl up the rear of the truck. To the front, Sunno pulled *Cataphraxes* clear of the convoy, allowing Doneal to target the orks still aboard their trucks next to the hauler. He

shredded the rearmost with a concentrated burst of fire, and it came away smashed to nothing by the convoy.

‘Die!’ screamed Brusc, his spittle coating the inside of his visor. His fury was unbounded. ‘You will pay for the death of Brother Osric! You will pay for the lives of every human your miserable kind has taken!’

An ork managed to get a blow past his guard, slamming down a crudely fashioned axe into his pauldron. The force behind it was phenomenal and he swayed back, with only the maglocks of his boots holding him in place. His sensorium buzzed his system with pseudo-pain, informing him that his pauldron was cracked. The ork did not get a chance to strike again. Brusc blew its guts out of its back. It was still snarling as it fell away.

Something landed at his feet. He caught sight of a fizzing stick grenade before it exploded and the roof collapsed beneath his feet.

He landed hard on his back, looking up at a hole in the ceiling of the trailer container. Panicked men were packed into bunks lining the inside. Medicae personnel reached for their sidearms. Brusc got to his feet as a pair of monsters jumped in after him. The first landed on Brusc’s chest. He caught its foot and sent it sprawling backwards. It crashed back into a rack of bunks, the weight of it alone enough to kill the injured men lying there. The second landed behind him. Before the first could rise, it died, its face blown apart. Sister Rosa nodded at Brusc from the far end of the container, a small calibre bolter in her hand.

He had no time to thank her. The second ork was on him, wrenching at his power pack with huge grasping hands. Brusc and the ork staggered backwards. He reached over his head, slapping at the plasteel of his armour before finding the flesh of the ork’s hand. He grasped it in a crushing grip, tearing it free of his battleplate. Turning around under the ork’s arm, he yanked hard, pulling it off balance and locking its arm. The ork was a mass of knotted muscle, stronger in truth than Brusc, but Brusc was the more skilled warrior. A blow of his forearm bent the thing’s elbow the wrong way, shattering it. The ork roared, maw revealing a wealth of yellow fangs. Its uninjured hand went for a big knife at its belt. Brusc smashed the knife from its fingers with his fist, his returning swing throwing the ork’s arm wide and exposing its torso. Brusc knocked it down with a kick to its sternum. Such a blow would have pulped the chest cavity of a man, but the ork was not even stunned. Brusc leapt onto it before it could get up again,

pinning it to the floor with his knees. He held its good arm down and closed his other hand around its throat.

‘Suffer not the unclean to live, suffer not the alien, suffer not the usurper of worlds!’ The ork thrashed about, but Brusc would not be dislodged. His armoured fingers dug deeply into its throat. Dark blood ran over them. He wrenched backwards, ripping out its throat. ‘O lord Emperor!’ he cried, holding up the scrap of flesh. ‘Accept this token of blood!’

Incredibly, the ork still lived. Dirty talons scraped at its opened neck, blood bubbled between its teeth, but its eyes gleamed still with hateful life.

‘My lord,’ called Marcomar from above. ‘A brother should guard his wargear with his life.’

Marcomar let Brusc’s bolter fall. The Sword Brother stood and caught it in one movement. He levelled it at the ork’s head. Unthinking fury glared back.

‘I grant you release from your unclean existence.’

The double report of the bolter and the bang of its munition blasting apart the ork’s skull killed all sound in the container.

Brusc stared at the thing’s ruined face, only vaguely aware of his surroundings.

A massive detonation outside snapped him back to his senses. Brusc’s vox crackled into life.

‘The orks are retreating, Sword Brother,’ said Sunno matter of factly.

‘Praise be,’ said Brusc, and felt some of the shadow retreat from his heart.

‘We should save our thanks, brother,’ said Sunno. ‘There’s a storm coming in.’

Armageddon had not quite finished with its convulsions. One last wall of razored ash blasted across the wastes and into the hives. All across the twinned continents of Primus and Secundus the fighting stopped again.

The convoy drove on through the furnace winds laced with cutting ash. The vehicles slowed to a crawl, the remaining haulers rocking on their suspension in the wind.

‘Visibility’s down to twenty metres,’ said Sunno. ‘I’m driving blind.’

‘Keep on,’ ordered Brusc.

‘I never said I would not. I trust *Cataphraxes*,’ said the dour initiate, his vox roughened by the storm’s static.

Brusc sat alone in the damaged trailer. The wounded had been crammed into the other containers as soon as Sunno reported the storm. The Jopali had fixed a tarpaulin over the rent in the room, but it had been torn away as the storm strengthened. Wind whistled through the teeth of the gash. Already ash was building up on the floor, and the air was grey-yellow with suspended particles, coating Brusc's armour.

'Brother,' said Sunno. 'There is an abandoned facility upon my cartographia, very old, but it might give us somewhere to wait this mess out.'

'Head for it,' said Brusc. 'We shall die if we do not.'

A cleft in the rock appeared, wide enough to take the trucks. Brusc stood on loose gravel, eyeing it thoughtfully. After a moment's consideration, he ordered Sunno forward and he walked alongside. Crags materialised out of the haze, tall and wind-worn. He checked the poorly detailed map imagery projected by his helmet. The sole large building and open pit it sat in on the far side of the canyon were unlabelled. 'Is this a mine?'

'Must be,' said Sunno. 'Even if not, we'll be out of the wind. Hidden. No orks are going to be out in this. The humans need their rest.' An edge of derision crept into Sunno's voice.

'That they do,' said Brusc. He did not upbraid Sunno for his tone; it was a sentiment all of the Black Templars expressed. Their crusading spirit, the desire to head ever onward and to destroy the enemies of the Emperor bred into them a certain impatience with weaker men. Brusc was well aware that he felt it; indeed, he had said something similar only days before when they had come to the hospital. Osric had picked him up on it. He always had more patience for the unenhanced, for citizens. Contempt for the weakness of common men was not something Brusc was proud of feeling, but feel it he did. Osric had always been the better man.

He voxed back to Lieutenant Ghaskar, telling him to follow *Cataphraxes* in.

'I will go first,' said Brusc. 'Follow me slowly. Marcomar and Doneal, cover me as best you can.'

Brusc unclipped his bolter. Holding it up to his eyeline ready to fire, he walked into the cleft.

According to his auto-senses, the way through was twelve metres at the

nearest widest point. Stone walls rose up either side of him, trammelling the sky into the semblance of an ash-grey river. In the upper reaches of the canyon the wind moaned over the fluted strata of the rock, booming where it encountered cavities. But at the base of the canyon where Brusc walked, the air was unnaturally still. *Cataphraxes*'s engine bubbled behind him, a mechanical chuckle quiet enough that Brusc could still hear the dust falls hissing down from the wastes above. Visibility in the canyon was better than it was in the maelstrom outside, but he still could not see the end. Bulges of rock loomed in the murk, semblances of trees or mythical giants. The red tint of his helmet lenses intensified the effect, making them eerie despite its efforts to delimit the objects it saw for him.

If we are going to be attacked during the storm, it would be somewhere like here, he thought.

He proceeded carefully, gun up, reticule flicking to every dark place in the canyon's wrinkled sides. None proved to be anything more than shadows. The deepest crack was a metre and no more – a simple faulting of ancient stone. The wrong kind of rock for caves, the wrong kind of environment. There was nowhere for anything to hide. Even so, he could not shake the feeling that they were being watched.

He thought he caught a voice and spun round.

'*Brusssssccccc*,' he heard. He could swear he heard it, barely louder than the engine and the whine of his armour. '*Brusssscccccc*.'

'Anything wrong, brother?' asked Sunno.

Brusc's targeting reticle danced over an ash fall sheeting down, seeking a threat and finding none. His finger relaxed on the trigger of his boltgun.

'No, nothing. The wind. Come on.'

'You are getting nervous, brother,' said Sunno.

'Vigilant,' corrected Brusc. 'Let's pick up our pace. There's nothing here.'

The Sword Brother jogged on. *Cataphraxes*'s engines growled louder as Sunno re-engaged the tracks.

After another hundred metres, the canyon ended.

Brusc took in the wide space before him. Visibility had improved again, the clogged air forming a diffuse ceiling over his head. He could see all the way to the other side of the pit, a disused open-cast mine or quarry. The canyon gave every impression of being naturally formed, but the topography here was anything but. They emerged into a perfect square, the

half-kilometre-long edges sharp as if cut out with a knife. On the far side were the dilapidated remains of a facility of some kind. Held off the floor on thick metal pillars, it climbed to the top of the pit wall opposite to a steep roadway that went from floor to edge via several switchbacks. The facility was made of local iron and had reddened in what little moisture there was in the air. He took in the corrosion from both ambient moisture and acid rain squalls and calculated that it had been unused for at least fifty years. More than that, Brusc could tell little about the place. His reticle flicked from point to point, unable to give him any more information than how far away it was, and what windshear would effect his bolts if he were to open fire.

‘The mine,’ said Sunno.

‘Any indication what they were doing here?’ asked Brusc. His voice sounded too loud in his helmet.

‘It doesn’t say,’ said Sunno. ‘Minimal information. Does it matter, brother?’

‘No,’ said Brusc. He walked forward until he was standing at the edge of a roadway similar to the one opposite. Evidently, the canyon had been co-opted into being a secondary entrace. The floor of the pit was not uniform. Cuboid sections had been lifted from it. the road headed immediately right from the canyon mouth, a generous arc provided for the turn at the top, three switchbacks taking it to the pit floor. He judged that the trucks would be able to go down, if they were careful. The road continued onwards, skirting the diggings, to the facility. ‘I am coming aboard, brother,’ said Brusc. ‘We will be stopping here tonight.’

Night fell quickly, hurried in by the ash’s gloom. The sky remained thick with ash and glowed strangely with the refracted lights of distant cities, but the pit itself remained clear. Were it not for rare gusts of wind, the mine would have felt like a cave. A stuffy stillness filled the place, the dying gasp of the Season of Fire.

Brusc walked around the camp set up beneath the broken facility. Chutes opened above truck bays ranged against the raw stone of the pit wall. The convoy did not occupy these, but had drawn up in a defensive horseshoe, ends anchored against the pit side. Within this corral there was little activity. Few without orders felt like daring the night; everyone was tired.

Loose sheets of metal banged when the wind gusted. When it did not, the facility groaned as the temperature changed. Bickering voices announced the approach of a Jopali patrol. When they saw Brusc they fell silent. Their sergeant acknowledged him with a nod. Once they thought he was out of earshot they resumed their arguments, their sergeant's threats having little effect.

Brusc watched them go. It was dark under the facility, but his suit picked out their shapes clearly. They reached the inner edge of the camp, and tramped up a set of rickety stairs into the building. Another group was patrolling the road leading out of the pit. He could not see them from his position but they too were arguing and he heard them.

'Keep your men quiet, sergeants,' he growled. 'Unless you want every ork within twenty kilometres to know we're here.'

The Black Templar passed the stairs and headed past the lone sentry guarding the gap between trucks. The man stared at him, afraid of Brusc and the night in equal measure.

He walked along the edge of the trucks, passing more men keeping watch over the pit floor and the road they had entered by. Brusc had the same impression of nervous energy from them all. He walked on until he was clear of the camp and the facility. It towered over him. He should have felt safe beneath it, but somehow he did not.

'The Jopali are staying in their trucks. They don't much like this place.'

'Brother Sunno,' said Brusc as Sunno joined him.

'I have been walking the pit floor.'

'There's nothing down there,' said Brusc.

'It does not hurt to be diligent.'

'You are uneasy?'

Sunno did not reply immediately. 'I'd be a liar if I said I was not.'

Brusc was silent a space. Both of them spoke quietly, but even in the privacy of their helmets their voices felt like an intrusion into the quiet of the pit, as if the animus of the place were offended.

'I have had to break up two fights. It is affecting them. I admit something about it sets my teeth on edge too,' said Brusc.

Sunno looked about himself, his lenses glowing in the flat face of his crusader helm. 'I feel it, I feel it brother. A… A rage.'

'A geologic oddity,' said Brusc. 'Tectonic infrasound, localised magnetic

field…’

‘Does your armour’s spirit detect any of those things? Because mine does not,’ interrupted Sunno. ‘Perhaps we should not have come here.’

‘Perhaps not.’ said Brusc. ‘Your diligence is correct. Stay so. The storm appears spent. We shall move out at first light.’ He looked around. ‘You are right, I do not like this place.’

‘Yes, Sword Brother,’ said Sunno.

Brusc resumed his circuit, skirting around outside the line of giant metal columns supporting the facility. The effect of the sky pressing down was claustrophobic. He experienced a sudden desire to remove his helmet and, seeing no reason not to, he did.

The neck seal hissed as it came undone. The air hit his face like a blast from an oven. Nevertheless, he breathed deeply of it, glad to be able to smell something other than himself and his suit’s coolant system. His mutilated face itched terribly, and he rubbed at the patchwork of scars and plasti-skin with armour-clad fingers. Without the red staining of his helm, the mine should have looked less sinister, but his sense of wrongness only grew.

For a moment he closed his eyes. It was so quiet there the silence became almost audible, washing out the distant voices of the Jopali sentries with its roaring hush.

‘*Brusssscccccc*.’

Brusc had his bolter in his hands before his helmet hit the floor.

‘Who’s there?’ he shouted. The voice had been louder this time, his name clear. ‘Who’s there?’

He hunted through the murk. His eyes were keen, but he regretted removing his helmet for he saw nothing. A new set of sounds reached his ears: footsteps scrabbling on loose ash, the thump and jangle of kit bumping on running bodies and the click of respirators.

‘My lord, we heard you shouting. Is there something amiss?’

Brusc cursed the men for their clumsiness, no matter how well intentioned. ‘Something is out there.’ He did not tell them it had spoken his name. ‘Gone now.’ His delivery made sure they were left in no doubt it had gone because of their racket.

‘My lord, I…’

A scream rent the air, confined, bouncing from metal walls.

‘The facility,’ said Brusc.

The Jopali had no time to respond before Brusc was away running from them. He easily outpaced them, reaching the bottom of the stairs within the camp in seconds. They shook dangerously as he pounded up them, the camp behind him going into a commotion in his wake.

His entrance into the bottom floor of the facility burst the door from its hinges. He squinted into the gloom. The room had been stripped of useful materials, flimsies and yellowed sheets of paper were scattered everywhere, square pale islands on the dark floor. Insubstantial partitions had once divided the place up into administrator’s cells. Most were gone, only jagged edges remained where they had been ripped away. A long row of broken windows looked out over the pit. Many had their shutters down. All of these showed signs of storm damage, and several shutters were missing altogether.

The far wall backed onto the rock, the panels that covered it fallen away in places. Only the chutes seemed permanent, giant square pipes pitted by corrosion yet still whole. Everything else was in decay. Acid rain had rotted through large patches of the floor. Through them, past the lumpen silhouettes of broken processing machinery, Brusc saw clear to the roof, an expanse of blackness punctured by holes that, together with the windows, let in the muted glow of the sky. For a moment, he saw the holes as a leering face. Only for a moment. Up there, near the edge of the pit, it was windier. He heard ventilation cowls rotating to face the wind, fans spinning, directing air into spaces that had long since opened themselves to the elements.

That was six floors up. Down at the bottom was only stillness. The room stretched on into an infinity of silences.

A pale figure moved in the gloom.

‘Who goes there?’ Brusc shouted. The figure stood still for a moment, then walked away out of Brusc’s sight, right into the rear wall.

Brusc swore, held his bolter at chest height and advanced.

Army boots clattered on the stairs behind him. The soldiers, seeing Brusc’s watchful stance, fanned out with their weapons at the ready. Feeble munitorum torches poked yellow beams of light into the dark.

‘Anything to report my lord?’ asked Ghaskar.

‘Only laxity! I thought you said your men had checked this place?’

‘Suflimar!’ Ghaskar shouted out of the door. A few seconds later one of his men came up from outside. Ghaskar had a furious exchange with him. Their dialect was so thick that Brusc caught one word in every four.

‘He says he did check it, my lord.’

‘There’s somebody up here. I saw him. About halfway down the hall.’

‘Maybe it was Bapoli, or Srinergee. That’s who Suflimar left up here, my lord.’

‘Where are they now?’

Suflimar called the men’s names out, his voice wavering. There was no reply. Vox clicks and mutters asking the sentries to check in produced static hiss.

‘Is there another way out of here?’ asked Brusc.

‘The stairs, down the far end.’ Torches converged to pick out a door ajar many metres distant, and broke apart again.

‘No. He went out there.’ Brusc pointed his gun. ‘Halfway down.’

‘There is no way out there, my lord,’ said Ghaskar.

‘The chutes, is there a way into the chutes?’ demanded Brusc. ‘Or behind the panelling, between the room and the rock?’

‘Nay, lord,’ Suflimar answered for himself. ‘Tere is notting, notting like tat.’

Brusc had thought the lieutenant’s faith in his men admirable. Now he saw it as weakness, putting trust in such as these.

‘There’s one there. You must have missed it,’ Brusc snarled. He went forward. The Jopali, unasked, covered him. His armoured feet crunched on broken glass and drifts of ash. The floor was unsteady, and he took care to stick to the joins in the panelling where structural beams ran.

‘Brother!’ shouted Sunno from outside.

‘Enter!’ said Brusc over his shoulder.

Sunno jogged up to join his brother. When he reached Brusc he handed him his helmet.

‘You dropped this.’

‘My thanks, Brother Sunno.’

Sunno’s bolter clicked as he brought it up. Brusc maglocked his bolter to his chest while he replaced his helm. Its features revealed to him more clearly by his sensorium, the room looked no less empty. ‘Where are the neophytes?’

‘Watching over the camp, and keeping Sister Rosa in her trailer. She wanted to come up here.’

‘We will not allow it. Something is gravely amiss here. I saw someone. Ghaskar’s men are missing.’

‘Understood, brother.’

The pair of them spread out, then took oblique lines across the floor toward where Brusc had seen the pale man. In the dark, Sunno’s white shoulder pads were a muddy grey, the black templar cross stark upon them. Brusc’s own red Sword Brother’s cross was invisible on black. He was a shadow giant, armour whining eerily along with the wind above. The weakened floor shifted alarmingly under their great weight, but they did not take their eyes or their guns from their target.

‘Brother,’ said Sunno. He held his bolter up one handed, pointing with the other. Behind a pile of debris was a body. Brusc’s auto-senses showed him what it was before he’d registered it. Data flicked before his eyes. A threat indicator unfolded in the lower left of his vision, and ticked steadily upwards.

‘Dead,’ said Sunno.

Brusc crunched over to it as stealthily as he could. Close inspection revealed a catalogue of horrors.

‘Not just dead. Mutilated.’

The man’s jaw had been pulled off, his tongue nearly cut around so that it remained rooted in his head and poked into the air. His eyelids were gone, giving him a crazed stare, as were the tips of his fingers. His stomach had been neatly excised, the guts and the tissue that covered them were neatly piled next to him.

‘Temperature reading suggests death occurred recently. Who is this?’ Brusc asked. The Guardsmen approached fearfully. One of them clawed off his respirator to be noisily sick.

‘Tat Bapoli, lord,’ said Suflimar. ‘Ork do it?’

‘One of their torturers maybe. One of their infiltrators, but I see no trace of their presence. Even the most cunning ork gives himself away.’ He searched for dung or disturbances in the rubbish strewing the place, and found none.

‘That’s not the work of an ork, brother,’ said Sunno privately.

‘No,’ replied Brusc. ‘It is not. Speak carefully.’

‘Yes, brother.’

‘Emperor preserve us,’ said Ghaskar.

‘We shall all pray that he does,’ said Brusc publically. ‘Be on your guard! The Emperor will not help those who do not help themselves.’

Sunno advanced further. ‘Here’s our door.’

With the barrel of his bolter he pointed to a rectangle of blackness in the stone so deep their armour senses could not penetrate it. Suflimar babbled a long stream of his nonsense Low Gothic at the sight of it. The other Jopali became agitated, jabbering back.

‘He says that this door was not here three hours ago when he checked, my lord, nor when the last patrol came by,’ said Ghaskar.

‘And now there is a door, and it is open,’ said Sunno. Unlike every other edge in the pit, square cut by mining machinery, this had a rough look, as if hewn by primitive tools. ‘It looks like it has been here for a thousand years, brother.’

A whisper came out of the darkness. ‘*Brusssssccccc*.’

Brusc’s bolter clicked against his armour as he pulled it in tightly to himself to steady his aim.

‘What?’ asked Sunno.

‘You didn’t hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

‘A whisper,’ said Brusc. Realising that their conversation was spooking the men, he switched to vox.

‘I heard nothing,’ said Sunno.

A scream sounded from the door. Up and up it rose, reaching a crescendo of terror, then collapsed into despairing laughter.

‘Now that I heard,’ said Sunno. He shifted, seeking a target in the dark.

‘Something fell is at work here,’ said Brusc. He switched back to helmet speaker. His words were harsh, the voice of the Emperor’s deadly angels, and it reassured the men. ‘Remain here with my brother. I will enter the dark and see if I can find your comrade. If I do not return within an hour, break camp and depart immediately. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Ghaskar. The men quietened, grateful to have orders.

‘Do not waste yourself for one man, brother,’ said Sunno.

‘There is more at stake than a life,’ said Brusc.

‘Then let me come with you, brother. Let me help you,’ said Sunno.

Brusc was already walking towards the door. Whispering came at him,

seemingly from within his helmet.

‘If I am right about what I think might be down there, brother,’ said Brusc. ‘Then only the Emperor can help me.’

He stepped into the door with a prayer on his lips, disappearing from view instantly, his black armour swallowed by the dark.

‘What did you hear?’ voxed Sunno. ‘What did you hear, brother?’

Only static answered.

The darkness was fleeting. Firelight took its place. Brusc walked down stairs unsuited to human feet. Torches flickered in sconces, too few for the illumination provided. The stairs wound in a spiral, down and down.

‘The lord Emperor is my protector. He is the shield of humanity,’ said Brusc. ‘I am His sword.’

Brusc was old, very old. Six hundred years he had fought for the Imperium, his blooding taking place in the Kalidar Crusade, yet another war against the orks. The following years saw the Black Templars criss-crossing space bled dry to supply Lord Solar Macharius’s glorious adventure, and he had fought all manner of foes before he was made an initiate.

But not daemons. He encountered them much later. The Adeptus Astartes were better informed about the nature of the warp, but even amongst them few knew the whole truth. As a Sword Brother of Dorn’s black knights, Brusc was one who did.

He had fought daemons. He had killed them. He had seen them suck his brothers’ souls from their bodies. He had seen the horror the daemons brought, how they twisted reality about them.

There was a daemon here. The hatred burning unasked for in his twin hearts made him sure of that. His teeth itched, a metallic taste was in his mouth. A sure sign of sorcery. That was the only word fit for it.

‘Let the Emperor’s light show me the way. Let his light cast perfect brilliance, dividing that which is true from that which is not true. Let it show lies for lies, deceit for deceit.’

His prayer grew louder, until it rang from the walls of the tunnel. In response, his vision shifted, the tunnel becoming the pulsating gut of a great creature. A brief vision that mocked his pleas for veracity, but this falsehood was driven aside by his will.

‘Let his light blind my unholy foe. Let his light show me my enemy. I am

a son of Rogal Dorn. I am the chosen of the Emperor. I am a vessel for his wisdom and his vengeance. I am a Space Marine of the Black Templars, an adept of the stars, and I know no fear. Show me yourself, I command it.'

A deep, throaty laugh answered, an entirely inhuman sound blended with the purring of predators and the gurgle of sucking wounds. This was a laughter that brought madness.

'Little soldier, little soldier. How you amuse! What power is yours to command me?'

A rasping noise followed, as of scales on stone. A hideous shriek directly blasted Brusc's ears, bypassing the aural dampers of his battleplate. He stumbled, ears ringing, which brought forth another burst of laughter from his unseen opponent that ended in a menacing, polyphonic growl.

Brusc staggered around the final turn of the stairs and came into a stone chamber bathed in blood-red light. An obelisk stood at its centre, made of dark crystal. Multifaceted and irregular in shape, it was pointed at the top and thinned near the base to the width of Brusc's thigh. A domed ceiling, covered in flaking paintings of things out of nightmares, curved over it.

The daemon watched. Long snake coils looped around the obelisk, black scales glinting. The thing was entirely serpentine but for the head. In place of a serpent's face it bore the features of three men. The leftmost and centre were shrunken, dead things, wizened as mummies, but the one on the right regarded Brusc with a vile amusement. A strange smell came from it, not the acerbic stink of reptiles, but an unexpected muskiness, pleasant until deeper breaths revealed undertones of rotting meat.

The chamber resounded with an unsettling babble, many voices, many languages. This uncanny chatter was inconstant in volume, falling below hearing and rising up again until the words were almost clear. The voices were in pain, or they mocked Brusc and his Emperor, or they begged him for an end to suffering or cajoled him to join them. Animal growls and hisses competed with the human sounds. Alien voices were there too. There was nothing of purity in any of it.

The daemon reared up high so that it might look down upon Brusc. This display of superiority from something so low spurred the Black Templar's recovery. Hatred spiked in him, and he pulled himself tall.

'The power of the Emperor is mine. It is the birthright of all men, should they have the strength to call upon it. I am of the Emperor's elect. I am one

of his chosen.’

‘You are no pysker-soul,’ said the daemon.

‘Through my faith alone is the Emperor’s attention upon me, and He stands by my right hand. Through me, He will slay you.’

‘The Emperor. You worship? He is your god?’ hissed the daemon. The cacophony of the damned swelled as it spoke and the daemon gurgled a laugh. ***‘Well. This is novelty not seen for long ages. Only once have I witnessed the cripple of Terra’s clone children bleating praises. Their devotion did not end well for them.’***

‘No others of the Adeptus Astartes see the truth of the Emperor’s light, nor ever have. We alone are the chosen.’

‘Do not be so sure, little soldier. There were others, until they saw the truth behind your master’s lies. But He is persistent. We grant Him that. Worshipped He is, and worshipped He has been. Foolishness is eternal.’

‘The truth saves.’

‘Ah! It does, it does! That you are right!’ the daemonic serpent swayed sinuously across the room, its body lengthening obscenely. ***‘Not your truth, for that is a lie. Behold! Here is one who was saved by the truth.’***

The daemon moved aside, revealing a man kneeling beside the obelisk who had not been there before; the second of Ghaskar’s sentries. He was facing away from Brusc. At some prompting he turned slowly, revealing his skinless face. He clacked exposed teeth together and said something unintelligible for his lack of lips. Slowly, he raised his hand, and showed the tattered rag of his face. It writhed of its own accord, an expression of utter horror upon it.

‘If you wish to worship, this is the way it is done, little soldier. Sacrifice and receive. A simple transaction, more honest than the lies of the Golden King.’ The triple head darted forward. A smile played across the thing’s plump lips. The dry smell of old decay came from its dead faces. ***‘Put down your feeble weapon. You cannot harm me. Embrace my masters and know power unbound!’***

Previously unseen runes on the obelisk flared hotly. Brusc took a step back, feeling the heat even through his armour. The disfigured Guardsman held up his arm and burst into flame. He stood unhurriedly, and danced to a toneless song sung by the mocking voices until his entire body blazed. Abruptly, he fell. Even as the fire consumed him in a riot of unnatural pinks

and blues, he twitched, jerking along to the daemon-song until he could move no more. Brusc shut off his air intakes, the smell of burning flesh and the daemon's stink too much. It had no effect, and the smell somehow infiltrated the machinery of his battleplate, growing stronger, making his head swim. His altered body worked harder to clear his system of toxins to no avail. The daemon leaned in very close, putting its face close to his helmet visor. Brusc found he could not move. The smell of perfume and spoiled blood was overpowering.

'Battle you have fought.' A long black tongue, suckered like the arm of a squid, ran up the crack of his pauldron. ***'War comes ever to this world. I came for one such war, with the Primarch Angron and his daemon-legions. He has gone, but I remain.'***

'Liar,' said Brusc through numb lips. He was salivating furiously, drool spilled down his chin.

'And who was the First War fought against, oh most noble son of the corpse lord? It is a secret closely kept. Do you know? No rebellion was the first war, but glorious invasion.' The head darted to one side, then the other, the daemon's face twisted with wicked delight as it appraised him. ***'And all the wars before that.'***

Brusc raged inside at his easy subdual, powerless against the daemon's sorcery.

'I know you, Brusc, I know much. Honour and glory, glory and honour, these things are everything to you. To fight and to die in noble cause. Six centuries you have scurried from one end of the galaxy to the other on the errands of your false god. What a waste of your potential, such a squandering of devotion.' The words hissed from the daemon's mouth, becoming ever more snakelike.

Images of Brusc's life forced themselves into his mind. His elevation, his blooding, his time with Brother Adelard… Years and years of war and service, years of suffering.

'So long it took for your accession to the Sword Brethren. They did not repay you easily for your efforts. So long to wait, and the victory so hollow when it came.'

Brusc could no longer speak. He remembered the honour duels. Three times he had tried his hand in the Circle of Honour. Only on the third did he succeed. Five hundred years old then. So long to wait. He railed against the

daemon’s words and was horrified to realise they were, in part, true. He had been overlooked. He had been neglected. Why, surely he was worthy of a Marshal’s badge?

‘All that faith and fire. And for what?’ the daemon said, its voice become seductive.

A torrent of memories were unlocked in Brusc’s mind, all of them of Osric. Osric, his last neophyte. Osric, the finest friend he had had in all his long years. Osric as a boy, as neophyte, as an initiate.

Osric dead, slain by the orks only days before. Osric brought low by the same desire for hollow honour.

Brusc howled, a formless bellow of grief and anger. There had been no time to allow himself the luxury of mourning. There never was enough time.

‘Yes, you see, little soldier. The Emperor takes and takes and takes. What does He give you? Nothing. In a moment I will make you an offer. He has already stripped you of your precious humanity. What use to you is a soul?’

Brusc saw it in his mind’s eye, the daemon leaning in intimately, its breath tickling his cheek somehow through the plasteel of his helmet.

‘This is what you will receive from your new gods.’

Brusc walking through fire, his armour changed. Fanged maws decorating his backpack’s vents, spikes on his shoulders. His head bare and tattooed, his broken face a study in delight as he gunned down dozens of Imperial soldiers. Other battles crowded his thoughts, many triumphs.

‘In your might you will bestride worlds. In your honour you will be unmatched.’

Great honour was bestowed upon him by raucous gatherings of others like him, renegades and the dispossessed. Men and demigods flocked to his banner. Above all was pleasure, pleasure at his power, to do as he would. This was his true potential.

‘There is no pleasure in your life. I can give you much. Others have come to me. Others have accepted. Others have prospered.’ Visions now of these men and women. Some drawn here in war, others in peace, all hungering for something more. Mutant, human, and post-human too. ***‘They had their greatest desires fulfilled. And who can blame them? What does your corpse lord offer, but the ignominy of slow defeat, hellish suffering***

as your worlds burn, holding back the fires of the truth. Here is my offer.'

The serpent leaned in as it had in the vision. As it had in the vision it spoke, words that Brusc could never remember, and yet which haunted him nightly for the rest of his days.

The Emperor protects! The Emperor protects! thought Brusc. Release me that I might do my duty.

'What is your response?'

A million memories pounded through his mind, a new humiliation with every heartbeat. He had achieved nothing. He was nothing, but he could be something.

Brusc was tempted, oh, he was tempted. He would spend many days and nights in contemplation, watched over by his Chaplains.

But he did not succumb.

'No,' said Brusc.

His defiance freed him. Brusc's limbs were his own to command. He raised his bolter. His armour thrummed in anticipation.

'Fool, you cannot harm me,' said the daemon. Its eyes glowed dangerously. ***'No mortal weapon can pierce my skin. You will die, and I will remain. I always remain.'***

Brusc opened fire, not upon the daemon, but upon the obelisk.

The creature told the truth regarding its flesh. Where Brusc's bolt-rounds hit they detonated harmlessly on the scales. But the majority of his shots smashed into the stone, knocking chips free as they exploded.

'Stop!' hissed the snake, and the sunken eyes of its mummified face opened and their mouths began to scream. It dived at him, spitting pinkish venom that smoked upon his armour. Brusc rolled under its head, bolter always firing, concentrating his rounds upon the weaker section of the obelisk towards the base. Sparks flew from it. With each shot, the daemon keened louder, and the voices in the air wailed.

His gun ran empty, and Brusc ran at the obelisk. Again its inner fire blazed. His battleplate trilled alarms at him, his coolant system struggling to prevent him being cooked alive.

Brusc dodged the daemon's weaving body, and aimed a kick at the upper part of the stone. He hit it with both feet and fell onto his back. The weakened neck of the obelisk splintered. It turned on the fracturing stump, and fell sideways.

‘***Fool! Fool! Free! I am freeeeeeeee!’*** howled the daemon.

There was a burst of light and a hateful snarl, and then all was dark.

Time passed. It could have been an age. Brusc was disoriented, his armour inactive. It took him some time to realise he had been buried alive.

His limbs were immovable. He was trapped.

A lesser man in such straits would have panicked, or fought his fate. Brusc did not. Even with his armour barely functioning he would not die for some time. After trying to mentally impel it to awaken, he gave up and lay there in silent prayer, thinking on what he had seen, trying to deny that he had been tempted. He could not.

Scraping reverberated in his helm. Something grabbed his arm. An armoured hand. Then there were more hands grasping him, slipped under his limbs, pulling at him. His plate rang with the blows of entrenching tools digging.

‘Brother, brother!’ said Sunno urgently. ‘Do you live?’

Brusc spoke weakly; without amplification his voice was muffled.

‘Yes. I am alive.’

‘Praise be!’ shouted Sunno joyously, and was joined by the neophytes. The faces of Jopali Indentured crowded round him.

Readouts flickered in Brusc’s helmplate. A building whine saw his power plant restart, and strength returned to his battleplate’s limbs. He pushed himself up, ash and sand running off his armour in rivulets, and was hauled by eager hands from the hole he had been in. He expected to be deep in the rock, and so it took him a moment to place himself. He was not underground, not in the facility, not even close – the roofs of the building he could see half a kilometre away. He was instead in a square excavation pit in the greater body of the mine delvings. He was outside, exactly opposite to the direction he had gone.

‘What happened?’ said Sunno, taking in the acid-pitting of his armour. He reached out to touch the damage. Brusc caught his wrist.

‘Another time brother. There are too many watching.’ He nodded at the Guardsmen around them.

‘Did you find Srinergee?’ asked Ghaskar.

‘I am sorry to report that he is dead, lieutenant.’

‘How?’

Brusc ignored the question. He examined the delving. He could not be sure, but there was an irregularity to the sides at the bottom that spoke to him of a broken stone dome, and that if they dug downwards they would find the toppled obelisk and the remains of Srinergee.

The day was clear for Armageddon, with yellow skies and a weak sun. The only ash remaining was high in the stratosphere. The rest had fallen, or been blown further on. He listened intently, searching for that seductive voice, but all he heard were the sounds of the men shifting uneasily around him, all eyes on him. Noises came from the camp. Shouts, the sounds of engines being tested, made weak by distance – sounds comforting in their prosaic nature.

His sense of unease, however, had not deserted him. A gust of wind stirred the sand. The last of the day. The last, he always remembered it, of the Season of Fire. Carried upon this breeze, he thought he heard a chilling laugh.

‘We must leave this place,’ he said. ‘We must leave immediately, and we must never return.’

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ANGRON’S MONOLITH

STEVE LYONS

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Sky fortress of the Relictors Chapter
To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit
Date: 3812998.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Magwen
Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji
Author: Chapter Master Artekus Bardane
Thought for the Day: Ignorance is blessed.

Attention: Lord Commander Dante. Your communiqué has been received and understood. I have suspended all current operations and am hastening to join you. This affront to the Emperor will not be allowed to stand! The entire might of my Chapter will be brought to bear against the ork defilers. Praise be to the Emperor.

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ONE

The last of the orks tried to run.

The tangled jungle floor snagged its foot and brought it crashing down. The impact snapped its primitive spear in two; the stone head had been blunted against its enemies' armour anyway.

Tarryn reached the outmatched creature in three assured strides. Even prone, even helpless, it spat and kicked at him and mouthed a stream of obscenities, which he couldn't hear over the roar of his chainsword. Like its fellows – all dead now – it had painted its face with red jungle dyes in hectic, swirling patterns.

Tarryn did his duty, as he had done many times before. With a sweep of his blade, he parted the ork's head from its shoulders.

'We could be doing more,' grumbled Baeloch.

The Relictors had formed up into a five-strong arc again. They marched on, heading ever deeper into the twisted jungle. They made no attempt at stealth. They could hardly have stood out more starkly from their surroundings had they tried.

The armoured shells that encased them, with their symmetrical greys and blacks and machine-smoothed edges, made for a sharp contrast with the brash greens, purples, oranges and browns that painted random patterns around them.

The Season of Fire was approaching on Armageddon and the temperature had been rising steadily for days. The Relictors kept their helmets sealed because the air was swarming with disease-carrying insects and toxic

spores.

‘We have killed scores of greenskins today,’ said Tarryn.

‘None of them combatants in the war,’ argued Baeloch. ‘Our efforts today are unlikely to have altered its course. Nor will they alter it tomorrow, I fear.’

He was marching at one end of the arc, to Tarryn’s left. To his right, Sergeant Juster led the combat squad from its apex. Tarryn wondered if he was close enough to have heard his battle-brother’s mutterings. *Most likely not,* he supposed.

The jungle was forced to give way to their belligerent presence. Sprawling branches broke against their ceramite plastrons. Wild plants were steamrollered beneath their armoured weight. Creepers clung to them and tried to hold them back, but were wrenched inexorably from their roots. The Relictors were cutting a wide, straight swathe through the tangled foliage, enforcing a semblance of order upon this realm where chaos, of a natural sort, had long held sway.

Tarryn was uncomfortably warm. His auto-senses informed him that his body temperature was optimal, but the pores in his skin were itching.

Baeloch was right about one thing. The jungle orks were different from the greenskins he had encountered before. They were just as tough and belligerent as any of their kind, but wilder, perhaps less intelligent and certainly less organised. They had not arrived with Warlord Ghazghkull’s invasion force. Rather, they were the remnants of a previous ork incursion onto this world.

The Second War for Armageddon had ended over fifty years ago, in a glorious victory for the Emperor’s loyal forces. The invaders, however, had left their spores behind, and many of them had fallen on fertile ground.

The jungle orks – *feral orks,* the Librarians called them – had sprouted from those scattered spores: a primitive offshoot of the species, armed and armoured with only what they had been able to scavenge or scratch-build for themselves. They had developed a language, but it was rudimentary at best, little more than a series of guttural grunts and snarls.

The threat they posed, compared with that of their space-faring cousins, was relatively minor – or would have been, were it not for their extraordinary numbers. The jungle was riddled with them. Some days, it seemed like Tarryn and his squad could hardly take ten steps without

disturbing another nest of them.

It often felt as if for every feral ork they killed, another five immediately sprang up from the soil to replace it.

‘I’m detecting movement ahead of us,’ said Brother Nabori over the vox-link.

‘I hear it,’ confirmed Brother Kantus. ‘Sounds like a lone creature, and a small one. Insufficient body mass for an ork. It could be another squig.’

The Relictors came to a halt, outwardly silent. Tarryn felt for the grip of his boltgun. He could just about discern the sombre shades of Kantus’s armour to Sergeant Juster’s right. Nabori, beyond him at the far end of the arc, he couldn’t see. Too much of the plant life between them had rebounded from their passing.

‘The target just cut across my path,’ said Nabori. ‘Coming your way, Kantus.’

‘Report as soon as you have eyes on it,’ Juster ordered.

‘I see it,’ said Kantus. He corrected himself: ‘I see him. It’s a man.’

The Relictors had already lurched into motion, converging swiftly upon their brother’s position. Juster and Nabori were the closest – and well placed to flank the unseen threat – but Tarryn and Baeloch didn’t need to be told to follow them.

‘I want him taken alive,’ said Juster.

By the time Tarryn had caught up with the others, it was over.

‘He came at me.’ Kantus was speaking aloud now, through the vox-grille in his helmet. ‘He was in a blind fury, tried to barge me out of his way. You can probably make out the imprint of eagle wings on his face. He broke his shoulder.’

A man lay in the trampled undergrowth at the Relictor’s feet. He was filthy, his clothes rags, clinging to an emaciated body. The man’s hair reached to his waist, grey, straggly and knotted, with an unkempt beard to match. He was clutching a hand to his shoulder and moaning in pain.

Juster rolled him over with his toe. The man landed on his back, and the remnants of his torn shirt flapped open. It was at that moment that Tarryn lost any sympathy he might have felt for him.

A rune had been daubed on the man’s chest, in the same red dye that the feral orks often used. It was crude, unskilfully painted, and yet each of the

five Space Marines looking at it knew what it was meant to represent.

There was no mistaking the highly stylised skull symbol of the most savage of the Ruinous Powers: the God of Blood, War and Murder.

Tarryn felt his blood rising at the sight of it, and knew that Baeloch felt the same because he stiffened and instinctively brought his bolter to bear. Sergeant Juster stayed his hand. ‘I said I want him alive.’ Baeloch didn’t question the order; nor, however, did he choose to lower his weapon.

Juster’s toe nudged the man in the ribs again. His moans had subsided. His eyes snapped open, round and white, his pupils shrinking. He parted his cracked lips and tried to speak, but the effort almost choked him. The words he managed to expel from his throat were disjointed and mostly incoherent.

‘Where have you come from?’ demanded Juster, but the man couldn’t or wouldn’t answer him. His mouth filled up and overflowed with the froth of madness.

‘Are there any more of you in the jungle? Where are you based?’

‘Sergeant,’ Tarryn interrupted him. He was looking at the tatters of the man’s clothing. The coat, he had realised, had once been mustard yellow, worn over a set of black fatigues. He had lost one boot and the seams of the other had split.

‘He’s Imperial Guard,’ said Tarryn, and now he felt more contemptuous than angry, that a soldier of the Emperor should have been reduced to this.

Kantus had seen it too. ‘Steel Legion. Must be operating out of Cerbera Base.’

‘That’s a long way north,’ said Baeloch. ‘The other side of the jungle, practically. How did he end up here?’

Sergeant Juster stooped over their dishevelled prisoner. ‘What was your mission, Guardsman?’ he barked in the man’s face, amplifying his voice. ‘What happened to the rest of your unit? In the name of the Emperor, answer me!’

The Guardsman’s eyes narrowed and, forgetting his injured shoulder, he seized Juster’s throat with both hands. He couldn’t hurt him, of course, but he clung to the sergeant’s gorget with unnatural strength all the same, until his fingers were prised from it one by one and he slumped into the dirt again.

‘He must have been lost, wandering in the jungle for months – years, perhaps,’ Tarryn mused. The Guardsman had lost his lasgun and every piece

of equipment he had been issued with, along with his sanity.

He had found his voice, though, as if his throat had been uncorked, and he was babbling about something. Tarryn couldn't make out what it was. Something he had encountered in the jungle. Some manner of mutant? A face, or many faces, their eyes glaring at him with tangible hatred. 'Couldn't escape from it… Ran as far as I could… I kept running, but it was always there again in front of me… waiting for me…'

'Where is it?' demanded Juster. 'Where is this horror?'

With an effort that wracked his wasted form, the Guardsman lifted a quivering finger. He pointed over Sergeant Juster's shoulder, towards the east. However, he then brought the finger around and pointed north, back the way the Relictors had come. He pointed southwards next, to where the jungle was deepest and darkest and as yet unexplored, and finally westwards, past Brothers Nabori and Kantus.

Baeloch found he could hold his tongue no longer. 'Sergeant!' he protested.

The Guardsman's eyes clouded over, and he began to recite a blasphemous prayer. The words that spewed from his mouth were loud and clear enough now, and offensive to the Relictors' ears. Juster glanced up at Baeloch and nodded curtly.

Brother Baeloch didn't hesitate to shoot the mad Guardsman in the head.

They stood in silence, as the shadows around them lengthened.

In the jungle, night fell quickly. It kept the sweltering heat of the daytime trapped beneath its canopy, however.

'Most likely, he saw nothing,' said Baeloch finally. 'His mind was broken.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Juster. He glanced up at the darkening sky and made a decision. 'Perhaps not. We should investigate, at least.'

They formed up into their arc again, the same positions as before; but this time, they varied their heading by seventy degrees. They set off in the direction from which the mad Guardsman had come stumbling.

'We're wasting our time with this,' Baeloch muttered, again too softly for anyone but Tarryn to hear him. 'We could be doing more.'

Baeloch was a more experienced warrior than Tarryn. It was certainly no secret that he felt he ought to have made sergeant by now. Still, Tarryn felt uncomfortable when his battle-brother voiced such opinions.

It felt as if Baeloch were questioning the decisions of their leaders – although, of course, he never went that far.

Tarryn trusted his leaders implicitly. Sergeant Juster, he felt confident, had never issued an order without good reason. Even so, sometimes he found those reasons difficult to grasp. *Were* they wasting their time in this jungle, Tarryn wondered, when there were bigger, more important battles to be fought in the cities outside of it?

Could Baeloch be right?

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TWO

They reported in to base camp late the following day, having been out searching the jungle for ten days straight. The moons of Armageddon had come out, and they could hear the snuffling of nocturnal predators in the undergrowth.

They were greeted by bad news. Sergeant Juster heard it from the leader of another combat squad and passed it on to them. ‘The orks have taken Hive Acheron.’

Tarryn thought there must have been a mistake. Acheron was a huge city, to the east, housing billions of souls. How could it have fallen so easily?

Sergeant Juster sounded angry as he answered that unvoiced question. ‘It is said that a traitor threw open the gates for them.’

‘If only we could have been there,’ said Baeloch with a shake of his head. *Instead of tramping through this Emperor-forsaken jungle on a fool’s quest*, he may as well have added. ‘We could have prevented this.’

Their camp was a clearing, a kilometre in diameter, scoured out of the foliage with swords and flamers. It was ringed by transport shuttles, a steel barrier to any attackers. At its centre was a single prefabricated building, which served as their company’s command and communications centre.

Five other combat squads were present, three of them on sentry duty, while Chapter-serfs and the occasional half-machine servitor scuttled between them on endless errands. A number of Apothecaries and Techmarines stood by to help tend to the combatants’ wounds and patch up damage to their equipment.

The Relictors Fourth Company had established three bases before this one.

A week or two from now, once their search of this area had been completed, they would fly further southwards, scour out another clearing and the process would begin all over again.

Tarryn replenished his ammunition from the stores, held aboard one of the shuttles. He joined a group of battle-brothers who were stripping down and cleaning their boltguns. Sergeant Juster had dismissed his squad and reported to Captain Maegar in the command centre. Now, a serf came hurrying out of the centre on a mission.

He returned with a heavy-set figure, enwrapped in an onyx-black cloak with a blood-red lining over a tarnished breastplate. His temples were adorned with patches of greying hair, and his cheeks were ruddy with sweat from the late-evening heat. A warhammer was slung from his hip, its iron head engraved with holy sigils. Otherwise, he cut an unassuming figure, particularly by the standards of his order.

So, Inquisitor Halstron had been summoned to hear Juster's news!

Baeloch followed Tarryn's gaze and nodded. 'This is about what happened yesterday,' he deduced. 'You saw the vile symbols on that man's chest.'

He explained to the other Relictors about his squad's encounter with the mad Guardsman. One of them spoke up, thoughtfully: 'We disturbed a greenskin nest four days ago. They had marked themselves with the symbol of the Blood God too.'

'They're growing bolder,' another battle-brother remarked. 'We've all seen it. The feral orks are congregating in ever larger groups and have taken to lying in wait for us. Some have even started to lay crude traps.'

Baeloch nodded. 'Such as the spiked pit that Sergeant Kharran's squad discovered.' Tarryn had heard of other examples too.

Sergeant Juster emerged from the command centre. He had removed his helmet to reveal a chiselled, unscarred face, tightened by a thoughtful frown.

'You know what I hate most about these xenos?' Nabori grumbled. 'It's that they have no trophies worth the taking. Our only souvenirs of Armageddon are likely to be stone-headed axes and spears, and a handful of rat-skull bracelets.'

Tarryn was aroused from his half-sleep shortly after dawn, by a sound he hadn't heard in several weeks.

Aircraft engines were droning overhead. Instantly alert, he levered himself to his feet and looked up to the sky. He saw the last of a squadron of grey and black Stormtalons, passing high over the clearing. Their contrails showed them headed south-south-east – towards the sector of the jungle that his squad had searched two days ago.

He doubted that the pilots would see much through the trees. They never did. The Stormtalons' very presence, however, suggested that something was afoot.

Captain Maegar must have summoned the ships from the Chapter's sky fortress at the edge of the system.

Tarryn's squad assembled, ready to head out into the jungle again. Before they left, the captain had them – and the rest of his company, those present – form up for a briefing. Normally, he would simply have reminded them of their mission and had his Chaplain bestow a blessing upon them. This morning, however, he talked at length about Hive Acheron's downfall.

He confessed that the Imperium had suffered a terrible setback, but sermonised that there were vital lessons to be learned from it: chief among them, a reminder of the importance of constant vigilance. 'We must ever be alert for the signs of treachery,' said the captain. 'Yes, even and especially in those who are closest to us. Remember, to question is to doubt, and doubt is the bane of faith.'

They had also been reminded of the urgency of their own assignment, he said. No one knew how many feral orks infested the equatorial jungle. Their numbers only seemed to have grown in half a century, despite the best efforts of Armageddon's ork hunters to control them. In a sense, these too could be called 'the enemy within'.

More than one tribe, it was rumoured, had marched out of the jungle already. They had joined up with Warlord Ghazghkull's armies, who had welcomed them into their ranks and equipped them for war. So long as the feral orks endured here, the invaders would always know where to look for reinforcements.

Tarryn couldn't resist a sidelong glance at Baeloch, to see how he reacted to that news. He held his grizzled jaw clenched, his square face set into its habitual stony expression. If he harboured any doubts about what Captain Maegar was telling them, he had the good sense not to show it.

Inquisitor Halstron watched from the wings – which was something new.

His lips were resting in a genial smile that failed to reach his eyes.

Tarryn didn't know what to make of his presence. Halstron had first appeared in the sky fortress, shortly after it had been dragged out of the warp and into the Armageddon System. Chapter Master Bardane had evidently been expecting him and had made a point of greeting this visitor himself.

Tarryn had seen little of the inquisitor since then. The word had been that he had attached himself to the First Company. He had followed them down to the planet's surface and into the jungle, albeit in a transport ship rather than a drop pod. Tarryn had been secretly glad. Not even the most blameless individual could ever be completely comfortable under a witch hunter's scrutiny.

A month ago, Halstron had turned up here without warning. Tarryn hadn't been present to witness his arrival, but he had soon heard about it.

Unlike the inquisitors who Tarryn had seen before, this one had no retinue of which to speak. He had brought a single companion to Armageddon with him: a slight man of thirty years at most, with pallid skin and striking blue eyes that stared out from beneath a ragged blond fringe.

Nobody knew his name. They hadn't heard the inquisitor use it, while the pale man himself whispered in his master's ear and nobody else's. He rarely ventured out of the inquisitor's lander, and never without him.

He was swathed from neck to toe in dark, heavy robes and his pale face never seemed to betray an emotion, at least none that Tarryn could discern.

Something about the man – his very presence – made Tarryn feel uneasy. He knew that the others felt it too, though none of them could explain it.

Captain Maegar announced a change to the Relictors' orders.

Their planned search pattern for the next ten days had been redrawn. Instead of heading to the north, Tarryn's combat squad, and the others who were headed out alongside them, were to march to the south-east once more.

'It must be because of the mad Guardsman, and what he told us,' said Nabori, as they waited for Sergeant Juster to join them and lead them out.

'Did you see Inquisitor Halstron watching us during the briefing?' asked Baeloch. 'He even brought his pet outside with him to observe us.'

'If there is a Chaos cult operating in this jungle,' Tarryn reasoned, 'of

course it would concern the Inquisition.’ It might even help to explain what the Relictors were doing here, he thought. *Remember, to question is to doubt.*

He wondered what was keeping Juster. As Tarryn turned to look for him, he bumped into a slight, robed figure. At first, he mistook it for a serf. He opened his mouth to issue a rebuke, but the first word caught in his throat.

The inquisitor’s aide – his ‘pet’, as Baeloch would have it – raised his chin and locked gazes with the looming Space Marine. Tarryn had that uneasy feeling about him again, even stronger than before, gnawing in the pit of his stomach.

The pale man’s face was its usual blank canvas. His eyes were glazed over as if no spectacle could possibly capture their interest, and yet… Was there something lurking in there? A treacherous glint in the depths of those bright blue orbs?

‘To me!’ Inquisitor Halstron barked, and the pale man bowed his head and followed his master. The inquisitor led him away impatiently, without so much as a glance in anyone else’s direction.

They joined Captain Maegar and, a moment later, marched into the jungle alongside the captain and his command squad. It was the first time either of them had joined a search party – the first time they had left the safety of the camp at all, to the best of Tarryn’s knowledge – which provoked some comment from the others.

Tarryn didn’t join in the speculation. He tuned out his battle-brothers’ voices. He was thinking about the inquisitor’s mysterious aide.

When the two of them collided, his auto-senses had detected a jangle of metal. Where the fabric of the pale man’s robes had been flattened against his body, the outlines of stout chains underneath it had been betrayed.

The pale man had been shackled, beneath his robes. So, he wasn’t Inquisitor Halstron’s aide, after all; or, if he was, that was only a part of the story. He was also the inquisitor’s prisoner.

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THREE

They heard the orks before they saw them.

Their guttural voices, the harsh and repetitive consonants of their underdeveloped language, were unmistakable. It was early afternoon, and this was the third nest their combat squad had discovered today. This time, however, there was something new about those voices, something strange.

Tarryn tuned his auto-senses to amplify the distant sound and realised what it was. This time, the voices had a lilting, almost rhythmic quality to them.

It didn't seem possible. Brother Baeloch, however, had discerned it too and was first to voice the inescapable conclusion. 'They're singing – or trying to.' The orks were chanting, at least, and it sounded like a drum was being beaten.

On Sergeant Juster's cue, the Relictors tightened their formation and marched towards the source of the sounds.

The sergeant had led them to a fresh sector of the jungle, just a short way to the south-east of where they had searched yesterday. He had told them nothing of his meeting with Inquisitor Halstron, so clearly there was nothing they needed to know.

The chanting/singing ceased abruptly and an ominous silence descended. 'They've heard us,' said Tarryn over the vox-link.

'They aren't trying to run, though,' said Baeloch. The Relictors would have heard any such attempt. 'They're waiting to see what we are.'

They're growing bolder, Tarryn's brother at the camp had told him. *The orks are congregating in ever larger groups and have taken to lying in wait for us.*

They had long since moved out of vox-range of the camp. They could pick up other squads, occasionally, but none were close by at the moment. Tarryn wasn't worried, though. Five Space Marines had been more than a match for anything the jungle had thrown at them – so far, at least.

'Sounded like a bigger group than normal,' Kantus noted.

They were close now, enough to hear the furtive growls and muffled snorts of the creatures waiting for them. Suddenly, a squig let out a piercing squeal, but it was silenced by the impact of a heavy, wooden object.

The first feral ork – more impatient than its fellows – sprang out of the foliage in front of them. If the creature was startled to find itself so badly outnumbered, it didn't show it. It drove its spear towards Brother Nabori's stomach. Nabori thumbed his chainsword into life and sliced through the weapon's haft before it could touch him.

His battle-brothers surged forwards, with their weapons screaming.

They erupted into a small clearing. Several squigs scattered in front of them: undersized, malformed creatures, with heads too large for their squat bodies and too many teeth in their gaping maws. The squigs were also born from alien spores: another, even less developed form of orkoid life. It was said that, despite their shared genetic origins, the feral orks cultivated the squigs as food animals.

At one end of the clearing, another animal – a large local beast – lay gutted. A stone slab had been hammered upright into the ground, smaller stones piled around it. The dead creature's entrails were smeared across the stones, and a familiar stylised-skull symbol was scrawled upon the slab in its blood.

It was an altar, Tarryn realised.

An arrow clattered uselessly off his helmet. Its stone tip was glistening, coated with some kind of venom. His auto-senses picked out four archers at the far side of the clearing, lurking among the trees there. The majority of the feral orks, however, were armed with close-range weapons. They fell upon the intruders in their midst, bellowing a collective war cry.

There were close to a score of them. Two of them came at Tarryn. One swung a stone-headed axe in each hand while the other strained to wield a massive club, in which numerous sharpened stone splinters, and a few of metal, had been embedded.

They seemed to have a leader: a larger ork than the others, with tusks that

were longer and sharper. It was hanging back, snarling out orders. The dyed patterns on the leader's face were more elaborate than those of its underlings, and it clattered with bone-carved jewellery.

It held a more advanced weapon too, a rusted shotgun. It must have salvaged it – or even won it in combat – from an Imperial soldier, perhaps another lost Guardsman like the one they had found two days ago.

The ork fumbled clumsily with its trophy. It found the trigger, but neglected to brace itself for the shotgun's recoil. It only succeeded in pumping a slug into a luckless squig as the weapon bucked out of its hands.

Nabori had already dispatched his first opponent – the hasty one – and he joined his brothers in the clearing. His arrival balanced the odds against them somewhat, and allowed Sergeant Juster to disengage from the melee momentarily.

He set his sights on the ork leader as it scrabbled in the dirt.

Juster's chainsword was his most prized possession. Its first owner had been the legendary Captain Bylar, who had wielded it during the Blood Star campaign. It was imbued with three centuries' worth of proud history.

The ork leader's hand tightened around its fallen weapon – as the chainsword severed that same hand neatly at the wrist.

Tarryn's weapons were newer, his own blade barely five decades forged, but he hoped that one day they might have a history too. He was writing a chapter of that history now, in ork blood. One of his attackers – the club-wielder – had recoiled from a burst of bolter fire. That freed him to focus on the other, and his chainsword gouged a scarlet trench across its stomach. The feral ork staggered. Tarryn thought it was going to fall, but then it came at him again, spitting gobbets of blood.

He parried the first of its stone axes, and twisted so that the second glanced harmlessly off a pauldron. He flung his opponent away from him, but another ork was coming at him from the right. In turning to deal with this new threat, he had to leave his left flank exposed. Tarryn felt the massive, studded club smashing into his side and a jagged metal splinter embedded itself in his armour.

These feral orks *were* bolder than he had seen before, he thought. They were bolder and stronger, more vicious and better equipped. Even their squigs had rallied from the Relictors' arrival and were snapping viciously at their heels.

Their leader was the strongest of them. Even without its purloined shotgun, it was giving Juster a good fight. It was wrestling with him, strong fingers locked about his armoured wrist, denying him the chance to swing his venerable blade.

As the contest began to swing the Relictor's way, the ork leader barked out another order. Tarryn couldn't translate the ugly words, but one of the archers set down its bow in response to them. For the first time, Tarryn glimpsed a crude wooden cage standing beside it, inside which something was moving.

He claimed his first kill, slicing his opponent from hip to throat. He rounded on the ork that had damaged him, but found that he had been beaten to it. He was just in time to see the tip of Kantus's chainsword emerging from the startled creature's chest.

He levelled his bolter at the ork with the axes instead. It was struggling to stand, until Tarryn put a bolt-round through its left eye, into its tiny brain. At the same time, he stamped on one of the squigs underfoot for good measure.

Almost half the feral orks were down by now, dying or dead. Their leader found itself on its back again, sprawled at Juster's feet. Juster raised his chainsword and struck downwards at its exposed neck.

Baeloch had made it deeper into the clearing than any of them. He parried an axe with his chainsword, while snapping off shots at the half-hidden archers. His ranged weapon of choice was a meltagun; its concentrated beam of heat burned through the flora effortlessly and turned ork flesh into slag.

Reaching the altar, he turned his fury upon it, scattering its stones with his whirling blade. A sharp blow from his heel broke the upright slab in half, while a melta-beam liquefied its blasphemous inscription.

Another ork had stumbled blearily into the clearing, from the direction of the cage. It had the appearance of a shaman, with black and red feathers on its head. It brandished a large wooden staff topped with a skull, and it was shaking – trembling in terror, Tarryn thought at first, but he soon realised his mistake.

The newcomer dropped to its knees, clutching at its head in abject agony, and suddenly Tarryn knew what it was. A *weirdboy,* as its brethren would have called it – a greenskin psyker – and it was shaking not with fear but

with the pent-up energy of the warp itself.

The other Relictors saw what was coming too. They loosed off as many shots as they could at the newcomer, even when it meant turning their backs on their own opponents. They riddled the convulsing psyker with bolter fire, hoping to kill it before it could utilise the energies building inside it.

The weirdboy jerked and thrashed beneath the sustained onslaught. Then its head snapped back, it threw open its mouth, wider than Tarryn would have thought possible, and it spewed out wave after wave of sickening force.

Tarryn found himself lying on the jungle floor.

The blast had thrown him over fifty metres. He felt as if the inside of his head had been scoured by fire, and his stomach was churning. He checked his internal chrono. He had been unconscious for a moment, no longer – long enough, all the same, for an enemy to ensure he never woke again.

He hauled himself to his feet. His eyes were blurry. He heard movement ahead of him, from the clearing. The rest of his squad were back there. He was relieved to find his battle-brothers unharmed; self-conscious too, at being the last of them to recover.

The ork weirdboy was dead.

It had been killed by their bolters, after all, but the unholy energies seething within its mortal frame had still demanded their release.

Nor had those energies distinguished between friend and foe. At least two feral orks had been cut down by them, or disoriented enough for their enemies – those who had weathered the blast better than Tarryn had – to finish them off. An archer was just coming to its senses beneath the trees, blood trickling from its snout. Brother Kantus’s chainsword decapitated it before it could stand.

The clearing and the undergrowth around it were littered with squig corpses.

There was a silence too that felt unnatural. Tarryn realised, eventually, why that was. He had learned to tune out the ubiquitous sounds of their environment, among them the droning of insects. He hadn’t immediately missed that sound, once it was gone.

Aside from the five Space Marines, in this part of the jungle, for now, no other sentient life survived.

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Infernus, Armageddon Secundus
To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit
Date: 3014999.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Rankor
Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji
Author: Commissar Marco Rickarius, 93rd Armageddon Steel Legion
Thought for the Day: Step not from the path of the Emperor.

I regret to report that the defence of our city is failing. Our watch spires have sighted a fresh force of orks marching across the ash wastes from the Pallidus Mountains. They number in the tens of thousands and have great engines of destruction among them. They will join the attackers at our gates within days. We request the assistance of Adeptus Astartes forces as a matter of urgency. You are our only hope.

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FOUR

Decario had had the vision again.

He hadn’t been seeking it, this time. It had come to him unbidden, as he had trodden the walkways of the fortress-monastery between his solar and the Librarium.

The image had smashed its way into his mind, through the barriers he had erected over a lifetime. It had blinded his eyes to all else, so intense had it been. Had he not been wearing his armour, he would probably have fallen.

He had come back to his senses, to the real world, with a headache, a dry mouth and a deep-rooted sense of foreboding.

A passing Chapter-serf had looked at him askance, and Decario had realised that he was leaning against a wall for support. He had straightened up and forced himself to walk on. It wouldn’t have done for someone in his position to show weakness.

Decario was one of the most important members of his Chapter, a peer of the Chapter Master himself. It wasn’t pride that made him believe this; the Emperor knew, he had wished it were not so often enough. He was the Chief Librarian of the Relictors, however, and the Chapter Master did as his Librarians advised him.

It behoved Decario, therefore, to advise him wisely.

He retook his desk in the Librarium: a circular chamber at the fortress-monastery’s heart, with a high, vaulted ceiling that echoed every footstep, every whisper, every breath. He sifted through the latest reports from the Armageddon jungle.

A message from the Fourth Company's Captain Maegar, who was stationed in the south, sounded hopeful. He spoke of feral orks exhibiting strange behaviour and of the deranged ramblings of a displaced Imperial Guardsman.

Decario had prayed for something more concrete by now. Still, he noted that Halstron had joined up with Maegar's company, so the inquisitor must believe there was some substance to their findings.

The Librarium was busier than normal. Decario had assigned all the lower ranks he could spare to the task of combing through the Chapter's extensive records again. They all knew about his visions, at least as much as they needed to know. They were searching the dusty past for a clue to illuminate the future.

Had there been such a clue in the ancient records, of course, then Decario would have discovered it long ago. Still, they had no hope but to try.

He lingered over a message from an Imperial Guard regiment, based in one of Armageddon's hive cities. They were under siege, pleading for assistance.

They had sent their request to the Blood Angels Chapter Master. A hero of the Second War for Armageddon, Lord Commander Dante had been an obvious choice to direct the Third. Almost thirty Adeptus Astartes Chapters had responded to his call to arms, and Dante had taken on the task of coordinating their forces.

He had forwarded the Steel Legion's distress call to several Chapters, the Relictors included, and flagged it as urgent. He hadn't issued an order – yet.

The Relictors had chosen their own assignment on Armageddon. Their Chapter Master, Bardane, had informed Dante of that decision, but only after his troops had put down in the equatorial jungle.

Dante had deferred, in the end, to Bardane's intransigence – though he hadn't been happy about it, by all accounts. There were greater, more imminent threats to be countered, in his opinion, than that of the jungle's unruly denizens.

Bardane had warned Decario that the matter was unlikely to rest there.

He laid the data-slate down on his desk and reached for a stylus. He began to compose a reply to the lord commander. *Utmost regrets… Operations in the jungle have reached a critical stage… Believe that the feral orks present a clear and present danger… All forces committed at this time…*

He attributed the message to Bardane. It wouldn’t have done for Dante – or any outsider – to know that his Chapter Master was currently indisposed. He set the message aside. He would have it transmitted tomorrow. With the Emperor’s grace, another Chapter would have come to Hive Infernus’s rescue by then.

He was struggling to focus on his work.

There were too many people around him, their footsteps echoing, and his head was still fragile. The vision still lurked behind his eyes.

Decario had lived a long time. His gene-seed implants kept him physically vital, but there were days when he felt every one of his four-hundred-plus years. The choices he had made throughout his long life weighed heavily on his soul.

He rose from his seat, deciding that a stroll might clear his mind.

His wanderings took him to a window at the edge of the basilica. He peered out through its stained glass – actually, an armourglass compound – across the spires and battlements of the north quadrant.

‘North’ was an arbitrary designation, of course. There were no magnetic poles for reference out here. The Relictors Chapter had been exiled from its home world fifty years ago, forced to wander the stars. Their home now was a Ramilies-class star fort: their ‘sky fortress’. It had had a name once, but very few of them remembered it. The name was considered to be outdated.

The Relictors had had another name once, too.

Armageddon, through the window, was a pinprick of light against the freckled tapestry of the Segmentum Solar. The war that raged across its continents seemed tiny, insignificant when set against the breadth of a galaxy like this. It was simply a matter of perspective.

In his mind’s eye, Decario had drifted tens of thousands of light years – and a century and a half – away, in any case. He was clad in the same suit of Terminator armour, but it was painted in the proud colours of the Fire Claws Chapter: orange and black. His right fist crackled with the energy of an oversized power glove – and he was certain that he was about to die.

His assault squad had stormed a hijacked space hulk as it drifted into the Stygies System. They had fought a running battle along the ship’s abandoned decks against an outmatched crew of Chaos Space Marines – until finally, the traitors had regrouped in the cavernous engine room, where

their leader had entered the fray.

He had called himself the Excoriator, and he was a potent Chaos Champion, with a sword forged in the flames of the Eye of Terror itself. Decario had fought toe to toe with him. He had lost. The daemon blade had shattered his force sword and broken his armour. His power fist had severed the Excoriator's sword arm, but even this had barely slowed him. Four brothers had given their lives to save their commander as he had sprawled helplessly on the ground.

He had sworn that he would make their sacrifices matter.

His flailing hand had alighted upon a weapon beside him, dropped during the battle. Decario didn't stop to wonder by whom. By the time he understood what he was holding, it had been too late. He saw the Excoriator turning towards him again, and he struck out at his nemesis with all his rapidly waning strength.

A single action, taken in a desperate moment, but it had changed his life – and the destiny of his Chapter – forever.

'Listen. Listen to me.'

It had been the voice of Inquisitor de Marche that had reached him.

'There is only the Emperor. Say it with me.'

The daemon was battering at the sagging gates of his mind. Decario could feel its oily black talons straining through the bars, tearing at his sense of self.

'There is only the Emperor, and He is our shield and protector.'

The inquisitor had fought at his side, he had recalled. The Excoriator's sword had laid him low. He was bleeding, but still clinging to life and to consciousness. He clung to the sword too, but lacked the strength to wrest it from Decario's grip.

'The daemon is bound within the blade. You must cast out the daemon from your mind and relinquish the sword.'

Somehow, he had pulled the scattered splinters of his psyche together and done as the inquisitor's insistent voice exhorted him. Letting go of the sword had felt like surrendering a part of himself, but that had just been a lie of the warp.

He had woken on his knees, on the enginarium's floor, and for the first and last time he had wept, convinced that he was lost. He had opened himself up to the corruption of Chaos, and his soul was indelibly stained.

He had thrown himself at Inquisitor de Marche's mercy. He had prayed for the Emperor's forgiveness, but de Marche had laid down the daemon sword and knelt beside him. He had turned Decario's head towards the still-twitching corpse of the Chaos Champion, decapitated by his own evil blade.

'Don't you see? There is nothing to forgive.'

Decario thought about his old friend now, as he gazed out at the stars. De Marche had been a grim, distant figure before – as so many members of the Ordo Malleus were – cloaked in his own dark secrets. Following the battle aboard the *Captor of Sin*, however, he and Librarian Decario had grown inseparable.

He still felt the sorrow of the last time he had seen him, when the Inquisition had come to take one of their own.

There had been no choice but to hand de Marche over to the Ordo Hereticus. The Relictors had had to accept their punishment too and serve their penance, for allowing de Marche's ideas to taint them. The alternative would have been their Chapter's destruction – and they had to survive.

Decario blinked away the image of de Marche, his head stooped, his eyes hooded as he was led away to his fate in chains. He let another image swim in front of his mind's eye instead: the one that he had been seeing in dreams for weeks.

The image was that of an eye without a lid, always open, staring back into the Chief Librarian's soul even as he stared at it, and weeping viscous tears of blood.

He had known, when he had lifted that sword a century and a half ago – as vehemently as he had denied it, even to himself, he had *known* – that, in truth, he had been chosen to fulfil a higher purpose. He had felt the same way when he had let them take de Marche and held his silence.

The vision of the bleeding eye was only proof of what he had always believed.

The war on Armageddon meant nothing, less than nothing, when compared to the carnage about to engulf the entire Imperium. The only thing that mattered was that the Relictors were ready to turn back the Chaos tide. They had dire need of the artefact that, according to Decario's divinations, had been lost and was buried deep in Armageddon's sprawling equatorial jungle.

They needed the shard.

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FIVE

The jungle air was thick with the stench of death. Even the Relictors' helmets couldn't filter it out completely. They heard the buzzing of insects – much louder than usual, concentrated a short way ahead of them – and the mocking cry of a carrion bird.

It was hardly a surprise then, when they came upon the first body.

It was Tarryn who saw it. It was hidden in the undergrowth; he might have missed it, or stumbled over it, had a cloud of fat, black flies not marked its resting place.

A feral ork. It was spread-eagled on its stomach, exposing a bloody gash between its shoulder blades. 'Looks like it was felled by an axe,' he voxed his brothers.

The blow hadn't killed its victim immediately. The ork had tried to run. Tarryn could trace its path easily with his eyes, from the branches it had broken and the blood it had left smeared on them.

The Relictors followed that path and found more bodies at the end of it.

There had been a brutal battle here, evidently. The jungle had been trampled in an area a hundred metres across. At least forty feral orks lay strewn across that area. Most of them were dead, but one of them stirred and made a feeble grab at Kantus's ankle with a broken, bloodied hand. A bolt-round put it out of its misery.

'What do you think did this?' Nabori murmured.

Another combat squad, was Tarryn's first suspicion. Somehow, they had strayed off course into a neighbouring sector, or another squad had wandered into theirs.

A closer inspection, however, revealed no chainsword bites upon the scattered corpses, no bolt-rounds embedded in their hides. The orks had been killed by clubs, axes and arrows. ‘They did it to each other,’ Tarryn realised.

‘Rival greenskin tribes?’ suggested Baeloch.

Sergeant Juster shook his head. ‘Look at their markings. They’re the same – two red stripes, crossed through, on the left shoulder.’

‘They’re the same tribe,’ Nabori concluded.

‘We’ve seen infighting before,’ said Juster. ‘Maybe two or three greenskins squabbling over who gets to be the leader. But nothing on this scale.’

Many of the feral orks were locked together, even in death, even with their primitive weapons discarded or broken. Their fingers were gouged into each other’s muscles, their tusks tearing through each other’s flesh.

‘A violent madness must have seized them,’ said Kantus.

‘One that couldn’t be sated nor exhausted, until every last one of them was dead,’ agreed Tarryn.

It was a sombre group of Space Marines who finally left that charnel place behind them. The morning was young and they had much ground to cover before sundown.

Nor did the jungle seem disposed towards easing their passage. It grew more densely and in tighter knots around them than in any area they had been before. Its canopy, high above the Relictors’ heads, had closed its fingers, and the light of the distant sun had to strain to reach them.

To Tarryn, it felt as if the jungle were closing in around the Space Marines.

He thought about the battle he had fought, three days ago. He thought about the feral ork that had violated his mind and laid him low. He knew that some greenskins developed such talents – as did some men, touched by the corruption of the warp – but it was a rare phenomenon. It felt like another bad omen.

His squad had fought several other battles since then, albeit none quite as fraught. They had encountered and killed more feral orks in three days than they had in the whole of the preceding week: as if, for some reason, they were gathering in this area.

They’re growing bolder…

Other squads, they had learned from their infrequent vox-contacts, had

observed increases in ork activity too. Many of them had taken casualties. A number of their enemies had been armed with scavenged weapons, or spears and axes had been more skilfully crafted than most and better able to slice through armour plating.

Two Relictors had been killed, and one combat squad had disappeared entirely. Nobody had heard from them in almost a week. Captain Maegar had sent twenty battle-brothers after them, but as yet there had been no news from the search party, at least none of which Tarryn had been apprised.

His thoughts kept returning to the site of the massacre.

What profane force, he wondered, could have incited so many feral orks into such a murderous frenzy as to slaughter their own kin? *The same force, perhaps*, he thought, *that could drive an Imperial Guardsman out of his mind.*

'I've got that stink in my nostrils again,' Kantus grumbled, presently.

He wasn't the only one.

The Relictors picked their way through the foliage, cautiously. As Sergeant Juster reminded them, there could still be an ambush ahead of them. None of them were surprised, however, by what they discovered instead.

Another feral ork killing ground. Another place of death.

It was just like before; in fact, the scene was eerily similar. Around forty gouged and battered corpses, festering in the midday sun, and no sign of any enemy, any force that could have visited this grisly fate upon them. No force but their own.

The victims had died in the past two or three days, and each bore the same design upon its left shoulder: two stripes, painted with red jungle dye, crossed through.

Sergeant Juster lifted a body with his toe. It was lying on its stomach, with an arrow shaft protruding from the back of its neck. 'It can't be…'

Tarryn saw it too, though, like his sergeant, he found it impossible to believe.

He was standing beside an ancient, wizened tree, with roots like gnarled claws clinging stubbornly to the ground. It had weathered the recent carnage, while many around it had been felled or broken. Between its roots, small patches of ugly, black flowers sprouted pugnaciously, and two feral

orks lay locked in a deathly embrace.

He looked over his shoulder and, just where he had expected to find it, there lay the ork that had stirred and made a futile grab for Kantus's ankle.

Baeloch still needed more convincing.

He turned and marched brusquely away from the others. He took a well-trampled path, but the jungle soon swallowed him up regardless. A moment later, his voice broke over the vox-channel. He had found the ork that had run, with the axe wound in its back – the one that Tarryn had originally come across.

'The same place again,' breathed Nabori.

'But how could we have come back here?' asked Tarryn.

No one could answer that question.

When the Relictors had set out from this position before, they had marched due south to the border of their assigned sector. There, they had turned ninety degrees to the left and, a short march later, they had done the same again.

So, how could they have ended up back in the same place?

They should have been facing northwards – and they *had* been, they were sure of it – so, how could they possibly have approached this site from the east?

Tarryn's auto-senses confirmed it, concurring with his brothers' readings. The first trail they had ploughed still ran across their path, from north to south.

'Could something have baffled our instruments?' Nabori conjectured.

'Or perhaps our wits,' offered Kantus.

Tarryn seized upon the first, and less disturbing, of those possibilities. 'A disturbance in the planet's magnetic field here, perhaps.'

'In which case, why didn't our Stormtalon pilots report it when they scouted this area three days ago?' asked Baeloch, rejoining them.

'Remember the Guardsman?' said Nabori. 'Remember what he said?'

'Who cares about the babblings of a heretic?' Baeloch sneered.

But Tarryn remembered: *…Ran as far as I could… I kept running, but it was always there again in front of me… waiting for me…*

'What do we do?' asked Kantus.

'Turn back and report what we have seen to the Librarium?' suggested Baeloch. He was testing their sergeant, seeing what his reaction would be.

‘Not yet,’ Juster answered him. ‘I want to search the area again first – the area we thought we were searching before, I mean.’

‘March south again,’ agreed Kantus.

‘Or back east, the way we just came from?’ suggested Tarryn.

The sergeant turned on the spot, mulling over his options. Tarryn couldn’t see his face behind his helmet, but he knew that, if he could, he would see a familiar thoughtful frown etched upon it. Juster glanced up at the sun, through the jungle canopy, as if to check it was still where it was meant to be. Then, he made his decision.

‘That way,’ he said, pointing. ‘We go that way. If there’s something, something hidden in this jungle that the jungle doesn’t want to let us see…’

‘Then it must be somewhere we haven’t trodden yet,’ Nabori concluded.

‘Somewhere in there,’ said Tarryn; and, as one, the five Relictors turned and gazed into the shadows of the unexplored jungle to the south-east.

‘Keep close together,’ ordered the sergeant, wading through the grasping undergrowth.

‘Baeloch, you’re our guide. Don’t let your auto-senses do all the work – question everything they tell you. Kantus and Tarryn, don’t take your eyes off your auspexes, not for a single second. You see any unusual readings – even the slightest flicker – I want to hear about it.’

‘Nabori, I’ll need a time check from you every two minutes. On each check, I want the four of you to sound off loud and clear. Let me know you’re still with me, in mind as well as in body, I mean.’

Tarryn knew what he meant, and he made a vow to himself: that the jungle wouldn’t cloud his senses again, if indeed it had before. He recited a litany of protection under his breath, building barriers around his mind against any intrusion.

He focused on the readings from his auspex, as Juster had instructed him.

He found out – later – that it was Kantus who had walked into the tripwire.

All Tarryn was aware of at the time was a violent flash, before the blast wave hit him like a brick wall in front of a speeding Scout bike. He saw it coming, thanks to his augmented reflexes, for a fraction of a second: too short a time to drop to the ground or brace himself or do anything but try to ride the wave out.

For the second time, he came to floundering in the dirt on his back. Tiny

metal fragments showered down on top of him. Tarryn felt his ears popping. Wispy fingers of smoke crept over him, as small fires flickered in the brushwood around him.

He could make out a grey and black heap lying close by, but he couldn't tell which of his brothers it was, nor if he was conscious or even alive. For a moment, it felt as if the world were holding its breath.

Then, the feral orks descended upon them in force.

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SIX

Tarryn and his brothers – his surviving brothers – were in retreat.

He wasn't happy about it; he had never withdrawn from a fight before, but he had had no choice. Sergeant Juster had given the order. He had also led the retreat to begin with, though Baeloch had taken his place when he had faltered.

They retraced their steps to the site of the feral ork massacre. From here, they had a choice of trampled paths. They turned north, towards the camp site. They had hoped that their recent tracks criss-crossing this area might baffle their pursuers; failing that, that the sight of their brethren, cut down and left to rot, might give the orks pause.

An eager war cry was raised, too close behind them. The greenskins had the scent of blood in their nostrils and wouldn't give up the hunt so easily.

Brother Kantus had died first.

He must have felt the tug of the wire across his greave and known, an instant before the others knew, what it portended.

Somehow, the orks had acquired a cache of explosives. They had bundled them together, the entire cache, probably, and lodged them in the cleft of a tree. They had attached the tripwire to them, then waited to spring an ambush on any enemy who survived their explosive trap.

Kantus had hurled himself onto the explosives as he had seen them falling. He had taken the brunt of the blast and his armour had been shattered.

Nabori had fallen next, overpowered by the weight of their enemy's numbers. The feral orks had kept coming at them, wave after relentless

wave, at least a hundred of them and probably many more.

Tarryn had been fortunate that Baeloch had been thrown close to him. They had fought back to back, so that neither of them could be taken from behind. He had lost count of the number of green hides that his chainsword's teeth had tasted.

He had found himself duelling with a heavy-jowled brute. He blocked its first axe blow with his blade, but felt the jolt of it up to his right shoulder. His bolter, he was using to discourage an attack from his left.

The big feral ork grappled him, pinning his sword arm to his side. Despite its squat shape, it stood almost as tall as he did. It strained to reach his throat with its teeth, and he found himself looking right down its gaping maw. He could see tiny jungle creatures, still twitching between its jagged teeth.

He lodged his bolter beneath the brute's grinding jaw and squeezed the trigger.

It let go of him and reeled away in blind panic; its huge body wasn't quite aware yet that its head was gone.

Tarryn's victory had come at a cost, however. One of the orks to his left had landed a blow on him. Its axe head had struck him between the ribs, the very point at which his armour had been cracked by a studded club three days earlier. He had patched up the damage as best he could manage on the move, but until they returned to camp, he lacked the resources to effect a full repair.

His helmet lit up with warning runes as ceramite and plasteel splintered, leaving his flesh unprotected. A fibre bundle, part of his armour's electrical nervous system, had been nicked too, and suddenly his left leg was almost too heavy to lift.

He pivoted on his foot instead and repaid his attacker in kind for its impertinence.

The feral ork's only armour was a patchwork of animal hides, secured around its torso by dried-out vines. Tarryn's chainsword sliced through it – and through the flesh, muscle and bone underneath – and out the creature's other side.

He had earned a momentary respite, which he used to take stock of the rest of the battlefield. That was when he saw that Sergeant Juster was in trouble.

We should have held our ground, thought Tarryn. *We should have fought.*

They could have beaten the feral orks, despite their numbers. At the very least, they could have punished them for their cowardly attack. They could have ensured that those few of them that survived would live the rest of their lives in abject terror of the holy wrath they had seen unleashed.

At best, they might have saved Brother Nabori.

When last Tarryn had seen him, he had still been struggling, despite his grievous injuries, from a prone position. A score of feral orks had leapt on top of him, but half had been hurled away as quickly. He had disappeared beneath a writhing mountain of green flesh. He might still have been alive. It seemed unlikely, but if the Emperor were with him, it was possible.

Space Marines were a hardy breed; many enemies over the millennia had pronounced one dead when he had simply withdrawn into a healing coma.

Sergeant Juster was no coward – that went without saying – so, why would he have abandoned their brother when there was still a chance, however slight, that he might be saved? Why were they retreating?

Juster had been closer to the explosion than the other survivors.

It had taken him a moment longer to recover his senses. The feral orks had been on him before he could clamber to his feet. He had been out on his own and was suddenly surrounded, overwhelmed. They had battered his head with their clubs. They had dented his helmet and smashed his eye lenses, effectively blinding him.

Every time he tried to stand, they had dragged him down again.

Tarryn had seen his sergeant's plight and snatched a frag grenade from his belt. He had pitched it into the heart of the blood-crazed mob. The feral orks had recognised it for what it was, and had known what it could do to them. They had scattered, leaving Juster to take the blast; but there *was* no blast.

Sergeant Juster had scrambled to join Tarryn and Baeloch, gratefully. A pair of feral orks had emerged from cover to follow him, howling indignantly at the way they had been fooled – as the time-delay on the grenade expired and it burst in their faces.

'I'm slowing you down. Leave me.'

Sergeant Juster had wrenched off his helmet. He said he couldn't breathe in it. His handsome face, unblemished by a century of service, had been ruined. His skull, above his left ear, was cracked and his fair hair was matted with blood.

His right eye had been dislodged from its socket and his nose ground into mush. He had lost his left pauldron too, and his collarbone was broken.

‘You can make it,’ Tarryn urged him.

‘I said leave me,’ spat Juster. ‘That’s an order.’

He had already stumbled three times during their flight. The third time, he had landed on his hands and knees and resisted Tarryn’s efforts to help him stand again. His eyelids had drooped, his speech had slurred, but he had fought his way back to awareness – or been stimulated back to it by the auto-injectors in his armour.

‘We could make a stand here, sergeant,’ suggested Tarryn. ‘We could–’

Juster found the strength to seize him by the wrist and glare up into his eye slits. His jaw was set determinedly, his nostrils flaring and his undamaged eye was clear and bright. ‘Listen to me. I don’t matter. None of our lives matter. The only thing that matters is the message. Don’t risk the message for my sake.’

Tarryn glanced up at Baeloch, who simply shrugged.

‘Tell the captain and the inquisitor what we found,’ said Juster. ‘The massacre, the ambush, what the jungle doesn’t want us to see. They have to know.’

‘Know what?’ asked Tarryn, confused. ‘What have we found?’

‘The monolith,’ said Juster, almost choking on the words. ‘Angron’s Monolith.’

They heard footsteps, crashing along the trampled path behind them.

A lone feral ork came lumbering through the undergrowth. It braked when it saw the three Relictors and unleashed a keening howl. Baeloch gunned it down, but there came answering howls from behind it. The orks – every greenskin in the vicinity – knew where their enemies were now, which route they had taken.

Juster grabbed Tarryn’s arm with his other hand too, and hauled himself laboriously to his feet. His armour’s servo-motors whirred, compensating for the weakness in his muscles. ‘Go. Both of you, go,’ he instructed. ‘Leave the orks to me. As long as I have strength in my arms, they will not pass me.’

Tarryn agreed, resignedly. Again, he had no choice.

But Juster hadn’t let him go yet. ‘Give me your blade, and take mine,’ he urged. He tried to bundle his chainsword into Tarryn’s hands. ‘Captain

Bylar–’

‘I know,’ said Tarryn, but he didn’t take the weapon.

‘The history of our Chapter, dating back to when we were Fire Claws, is ingrained within this steel,’ insisted Juster. ‘It has been my honour to safeguard that history and to add my own modest exploits to it, but the honour is yours now.’

‘You should keep it,’ said Tarryn. He didn’t feel worthy. ‘Hold off the orks with it. Let the sword be steeped in the blood of one more legendary deed. It will make its way back to us, if such is the Emperor’s will, and be all the more venerable for it.’

Juster nodded, gratefully.

Baeloch handed over his frag grenades. Tarryn had used both of his: the first to rescue Juster from the feral orks, the second to keep the greenskins at bay while they ran. The sergeant had two grenades of his own and two more now. They would buy him – buy all of them – a little time, at least.

They heard a familiar war cry, howling like the wind through the trees.

Juster was still bleeding from his head. His superhuman physiology hadn’t been able to staunch the flow. The blood had trickled into his left eye and closed it. He sank to one knee and braced himself in that position, sighting along his boltgun. In his right hand, he cradled his first grenade. His treasured blade lay readied against his hip.

Again, he ordered Brothers Tarryn and Baeloch to leave him; this time, they did as he told them. They retreated, with the knowledge that had been entrusted to their keeping clutched close to their anguished hearts.

They retreated, and barely was their sergeant out of their sight behind them than they heard the first explosion and felt the jungle trembling beneath their feet.

They retreated, and Tarryn tried not to think about the weapons they had left behind, lost to them forever, still less the warriors who had wielded them. He didn’t yet understand why three brothers had had to be sacrificed, but he knew there had to be a good reason.

Angron’s Monolith.

The very name filled his hearts with dread.

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*
To: Relictors sky fortress, outer edge of the Armageddon sector
Date: 3023999.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Galdorian
Receiver: Unknown
Author: Lord Commander Dante, Blood Angels Chapter Master
Thought for the Day: Reason is the cloak of traitors.

Attention: Chapter Master Bardane. As you know, the enemy is straining at the gates of Hive Infernus, to the east of your Chapter's position. I can spare no other forces to support the garrison there. Hives Volcanus and Tempestora are also besieged and are defended by the Black Templars and my own Blood Angels respectively. I have sent the Iron Champions to reinforce the Celestial Lions at Hive Volcanus, while fighting persists amid the ruins of Hive Acheron. We must not allow another of the Emperor's cities to fall. Respectfully, therefore, I insist that you abandon your current operations in the jungle and redeploy your Chapter to Hive Infernus as a matter of the utmost urgency. I require that you acknowledge receipt of this directive.

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SEVEN

There is nothing to forgive.

The voice echoed in Decario's mind again, as clearly as if the speaker had been standing at his shoulder. It was only a ghost, however.

He waited patiently in front of the great iron door. At the appointed minute – no earlier, no later – he heard the knocking of machine-spirits, as a complex series of locks cycled open. The door gave way with a sigh and a faint crackle of arcane energy, and the Relictors Chapter Master emerged from it.

Artekus Bardane had spent two weeks in the purifying chamber, undergoing a series of punishing rituals. He had needed to cleanse himself in body, in mind, and most importantly in soul, before he faced the trial to come.

Decario had brought him a pitcher of water. Bardane snatched it from him and quaffed it greedily. His shaved head glistened with sweat, his lips were chapped and his eyes were purple-rimmed. A whiff of incense clung to his muscular body.

He was wearing knee breeches and a simple cotton tunic, embroidered with the Relictors Chapter symbol: a white skull, in profile, on a field of black.

Bardane looked drained, as if he had been battling all the daemons of the immaterium single-handed, which, in a sense, he had. Decario, however – and he alone – had seen this often enough before. As his Chapter Master straightened and finally looked him in the eye – as Decario met his cool, resolute gaze – he knew that, once again, he had faced down those daemons

and *won.*

‘My armour,’ said Bardane hoarsely. ‘I want my armour, and then… Then, take me to the Vault.’

Decario smiled and nodded.

They walked the stone-flagged passageways side by side. Despite his recent ordeal, Bardane kept his head up and his back straight.

Decario filled him in on recent developments. He advised him that the search of the Armageddon jungle was still in progress. The monolith had not yet been located. There had been some promising signs, however, and he expected a report from Inquisitor Halstron in the near future.

He told Bardane about the distress call from Hive Infernus and Lord Commander Dante’s request, and then his demand that the Relictors attend to it. Bardane absorbed the news in silence. Then, finally, he asked, ‘What did we tell him?’

‘The order was received in the last day,’ said Decario. ‘I thought it best, in the circumstances, to hold our response until you could–’

‘Why?’ Bardane interrupted him, sharply. ‘What choice do I have in the matter?’

Decario held his tongue, out of courtesy.

The Chapter Master sighed. ‘We knew it would come to this.’

‘Indeed,’ the Librarian agreed.

They had come to Bardane’s solar. He halted outside it for a moment, gathering his strength. Then, he squared his broad shoulders, placed both hands on the doors and pushed through them. A small army of Chapter-serfs scurried to greet their master as the door swung shut behind him. Out in the passageway, Decario waited, again.

Over an hour passed before Artekus Bardane returned. During that time, he had undergone a transformation. He wore his armoured suit now: a burnished relic, emblazoned with battle honours and purity seals, though he had left off the helmet. Flames danced, reignited, in his eyes, and his jaw was locked into a determined grimace. Frown lines still furrowed his brow, but then they always had.

He is strong, thought Decario, *as strong as ever, thank the Emperor!*

‘Have you had the vision again?’ asked Bardane, as they resumed their journey.

‘I have, and more clearly than before. Codicer Ibraxin has seen it too.’

‘Then the warning it bespeaks–’

‘Has become no less urgent,’ Decario confirmed.

They were making better time now; in fact, the Chapter Master’s purposeful stride threatened to leave his companion behind. They descended into the bowels of the fortress-monastery, through secret doors and down narrow, winding staircases rarely trodden and known only to a chosen few. They halted, at last, before a door like that of the purification chamber, over three metres tall and cast from protective iron.

Torches guttered in sconces to each side of the door, having flared to life at the two Relictors’ approach. Bardane pressed his palm against a panel beside the door, and arcane runes lit up across its surface.

‘Who does Dante think he is?’ he grumbled, sourly. ‘I command the Relictors, not him. If I say we have more pressing concerns than one crumbling city out of millions…’ He snapped his bald head around to glare at Decario, as if he were to blame. ‘I have never disobeyed an order before.’

‘We must have the shard,’ said Decario.

‘And Dante would keep us from it,’ agreed Bardane. ‘The pious archangel with his halo, pronouncing his judgements upon us all from behind his golden mask – how could he ever understand?’

The Vault was a long, high-ceilinged chamber, more like a museum than a storeroom, albeit a somewhat depleted one.

Its artefacts, those few that the Relictors had managed to gather since the old ones had been taken from them and destroyed, were stored in glass cases or wooden chests, some warded with arcane sigils, some wrapped in heavy iron chains.

Decario lit a taper from one of the torches outside. He touched it to the wicks of a row of stubby, black candles, which filled the large chamber with flickering shadows.

The centrepiece of the Vault was a carved pedestal, chest-high to an armoured Space Marine, crowned by a glass dome. Decario was drawn to the dome, as always. Nestled in the folds of a crushed-velvet bed beneath it was a twisted scrap of obsidian.

It didn’t look like much – about a third of a metre long, with no particular shape, chipped and half melted along one edge – but it was the Relictors’

most valuable possession.

He remembered when de Marche had brought it to them. The inquisitor hadn't known what the shard was, then, but he had sensed the power within it. When Decario had sensed it too, he had pleaded for it to be destroyed.

'Such power is nothing to be feared,' de Marche had scoffed.

He had begun to protest. 'But a malevolent power such as this–'

'Is still a tool in the hands of its wielder. Have I taught you nothing? Must you remain as blind as the high priests and grandmasters of my order?'

'Our enemies wield this power,' Decario had recited, 'so we must learn to wield it too. But what if the power is stronger than he who wields it?'

'Then we must make the wielder stronger,' de Marche had countered.

'Such power drives our enemies to madness,' Decario had reminded him.

A spark had flared in the inquisitor's eyes, then, and the corners of his mouth had twitched. His words still echoed in the Librarian's head now, across the intervening decades: *They say that there is strength in madness.*

Bardane had stridden to the far end of the Vault. A high, narrow table had been pushed up against the wall. A large, gilded chest – a reliquary, engraved with images of gods and daemons at war – sat squarely in its centre. Bardane removed a gauntlet. His bare hand traced the outlines of the carvings, until something inside the chest clicked.

He snapped open its latches and lifted its lid.

'Is my honour guard assembled?' The Chapter Master didn't turn to look at Decario. His gaze was fixed on the reliquary's contents.

'Awaiting your orders, sir.'

'And do we have transport to the planet?'

'A Thunderhawk, on standby. As soon as we hear from Inquisitor Halstron.'

'I see no reason to wait for him.'

'As you wish. Artekus… With your leave, I would join you on this mission.'

Bardane did turn at that, with an eyebrow half raised in surprise. He asked no questions, however; he knew his fellow conspirator too well to ever wonder at his motives. He nodded his assent to the request and returned to his artefact.

Decario crossed the chamber to join him. He peered over Bardane's shoulder, at the weapon they called the screaming flail – or the *Artekus*

Scourge.

It resembled a simple flail, upon first glance – larger than most, admittedly – with three spiked chains trailing from a well-worn grip. As Bardane's hand hovered over it, however, its chains began to twitch. By opening the chest, he had disabled the stasis field inside it, and now the flail was stirring from its long slumber.

'We never saw Dante's message,' he proclaimed. 'It must have been lost or scrambled in the warp. See to it.'

'He won't let it rest there,' said Decario.

'I know, but he won't take any action against us without proof.'

The ends of the flail were beginning to glow, little sparks of energy flaring and bursting around them. Decario thought he could see fleeting shapes in those sparks: twisted, anguished faces. He tore his eyes away from them.

'There was no other option,' he assured his Chapter Master.

'I know,' said Bardane, but his jaw had tightened further and the furrows in his brow had deepened. He had spent two weeks in isolation, ridding his body, mind and soul of impurities. If he doubted himself now, if he allowed his shield of faith to crack, it would all have been for nothing. He needed the strength the ritual gave him.

'We do the Emperor's will,' said Decario, 'and those who would condemn us for it – it is only because they are too fearful and too weak to share His confidence. They would see us engulfed, every world of man drowned in Chaos and blood, before they opened the shutters on their minds.'

'Ignorance is blessed,' Bardane muttered.

It took a certain kind of man to command the Relictors.

Decario had nominated Bardane for the position himself. He had come up through the ranks, not just accepting but embracing every facet of their mission as it had been revealed to him. The Chief Librarian, however, had seen something else in him too, something more than merely blind devotion. In the young Bardane, he had seen a measure of arrogance, a steadfast belief in himself. *He will need that arrogance,* he had thought. He would need to do more than just believe in his Chapter's holy purpose; he would need to shoulder the ultimate responsibility for it.

Bardane took a breath. He plunged his hand into the reliquary and seized the wooden handle of the screaming flail. Without another word, he turned and marched out of the chamber. It was left to Decario to snuff out the black

candles and follow him.

He cast a final glance at the pedestal as he passed it. Its twisted black shard pulsed with a faint inner light of its own, as if in answer to the flail’s unveiling.

In that light, he could see the impression left in the velvet beside it, where a second shard had, until recently, lain.

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EIGHT

The two survivors made as good time back through the jungle as they dared. They were mindful of the risk of springing another trap, or walking into another ork ambush. Their pursuers, they were only too aware, were impeded by no such concerns. Indeed, they had already been attacked once.

Without warning, a trio of feral orks had sprung out of the undergrowth alongside them. Tarryn and Baeloch had hastened to deal with them, knowing just how quickly three could have become many more.

They were sending out vox-signals every minute, hoping to find another squad within range. At the same time, they were struggling to process what Sergeant Juster had told them, the secret he had revealed to them.

'If there is a monument to Chaos here…' Baeloch began.

'We don't know that,' said Tarryn.

'Angron's Monolith. It sounds an ill enough name to me. Angron was–'

'I know who Angron was.' *The Red Angel, primarch to the World Eaters Legion. He joined the traitor Horus in his rebellion against the Emperor and reaped his sordid reward from the Ruinous Powers.*

'A daemon prince of the Blood God,' said Baeloch.

Angron had ignited the First War for Armageddon, invading with an army of the Lost and the Damned behind him. *The Space Wolves defeated him and banished him back to the warp – but what might he have left behind here?*

And what could a loyal servant of the Emperor ever want with such an artefact?

'To question is to doubt,' muttered Tarryn, 'and doubt is the bane of faith.'

They heard stirrings in the jungle behind them, ahead of them, around them. Their auto-senses were picking up multiple heat signatures. Their pursuers knew this environment better than they did and were more cunning than they had grown to expect. Their numbers also seemed to be increasing.

Occasionally, the Space Marines heard a ragged howl as the feral orks summoned more of their kind to join them. *They're in league with the jungle*, thought Tarryn, *and they will kill us to protect its secret.* The Relictors had made it over halfway back to their base camp, but still had far to go. Had Sergeant Juster and the others died for nothing?

Baeloch came to a halt and drew his chainsword. 'We're surrounded,' he announced. He was right, and the feral orks were closing in slowly around them.

They were going to have to fight, after all.

Suddenly, there was a crackle in Tarryn's ear and the ghost of a half-familiar voice. He could only make out a few words, but it was enough. Their distress calls had finally been answered. *Too late,* he feared.

Another howl was raised ahead of them, but it spread like wildfire in a too-tight circle around them, building in intensity and volume. For the second time, they turned their backs to each other, Tarryn facing to the north, Baeloch southwards along their trampled path.

For the second time, they braced themselves as the feral orks – more of them than they had ever encountered at once before – came swarming towards them.

'–your situation? Repeat, what is–'

Tarryn recognised the voice. It belonged to Divolio, a veteran sergeant in the captain's command squad. He told him that Sergeant Juster had fallen, and two other battle-brothers besides. He struggled to get the words out and defend himself from the orks at the same time. He was being assailed from all directions, all but from behind, where his remaining brother protected him.

The primitive weapons of his attackers rained down on his armour like hailstones; it was almost more than he could do to parry half of them. He told Sergeant Divolio that they couldn't endure for much longer.

'–on our way–' said Divolio. Then, more clearly, '–this vox-channel open and we'll home in on your signal.' He was at the very edge of vox-range. There was no way he would make it here in time.

Tarryn feinted, making two of his opponents overconfident, causing one of them to stumble into the other. He made use of the breath he had bought himself. ‘Sergeant Juster entrusted us with a message, for the captain. He said–’

‘What are you doing?’ Baeloch interrupted him, over their squad channel.

Tarryn didn’t answer him. He slashed a feral ork’s throat with his chainsword and hugged the heavy, wet corpse to him, using it as a shield. *Tell the captain and the inquisitor… They have to know…*

‘We found it,’ Tarryn voxed. ‘We found…’ It didn’t feel right, speaking the name, especially over an open channel. ‘…the monolith.’

Silence greeted his pronouncement, but for a faint splutter of static. Then, another voice sounded in his ear, and he recognised the gruff tones of Maegar himself. ‘We’re sending help.’

The orks were falling away in front of him. Tarryn didn’t know why. He had slain a fair few of them, but that hadn’t discouraged them before. Then, suddenly, he saw something else behind them, a huge, slobbering beast with a rider, and he realised that they had been clearing the way for it to charge him.

The beast was a fully grown squig, known as a squiggoth – the first he had seen on Armageddon. It had the oversized head and squat body of its stunted brethren, but it also had a powerful-looking horn and giant tusks. It had a rickety wooden howdah on its back, containing its ork rider and an attendant group of smaller, weaker gretchin.

Tarryn fired his bolter at the rider. It would likely die more easily than the mount, and if it did die, the mount might veer off. He only had time for one shot, but he made it a good one. Blood blossomed from the rider’s sneering brow and it tumbled backwards, but the beast had been worked up into a frenzy and it kept on coming.

The gretchin were squealing in panic, baling out of the howdah desperately. Tarryn couldn’t dive for cover; there were too many feral orks around him, hemming him in. He yelled a warning to Baeloch about what was coming.

Then the squiggoth bowled into them both. Tarryn barely twisted out of the way of the beast’s horn, else it would have gored him. He couldn’t resist its hurtling weight, however, and the world went spinning, ground over sky, around him.

Baeloch was jarred too, but he kept his footing.

Tarryn was down and the feral orks were piling on top of him, as they had with Nabori, as they had tried to do with Juster. The squiggoth reared over him, its massive jaws stretching into a roar, and all he could think was that he hadn't done as Sergeant Juster had asked him. He had failed in his duty.

Then, the squiggoth erupted into flames.

It was thrashing about, screaming. The feral orks were scattering as well. They were wailing in terror – of being similarly burned or stamped upon? A bare few clung tenaciously to Tarryn, few enough that he was able to hurl them off and scramble out from beneath the burning beast as it toppled towards him.

A new presence had joined the skirmish. It took him a moment to focus through the smoke and the mayhem, twice as long to accept what he was seeing.

A slight, pale man stood among the feral orks, but was untouched by them. His striking blue eyes met Tarryn's astonished gaze coolly.

He recognised Inquisitor Halstron's aide, his prisoner. His dark robes had fallen open to reveal the chains that enwrapped him. *But how could he be here? How could he have fought his way to where he stands, and without my seeing it?*

Where was the inquisitor and the rest of the command squad?

The feral orks were panicking, fleeing from the chained man. Tarryn felt an almost physical fear passing over him and had to steel himself not to flee too. A handful of greenskins likewise girded themselves and set about the chained man with their axes and clubs. They may as well have battered at the walls of the sky fortress itself, because their strongest blows glanced off their target, ineffectually.

He almost seemed bored.

He waved the feral orks away from him and, although he didn't touch them, some invisible force followed the sweep of his arm, lifted them off their feet and sent them flying. As they picked themselves up, the chained man closed his fingers into a fist and his bright eyes flashed. First one, then another, then a third feral ork exploded into flames as the squiggoth had before them. It was the last straw for those few that remained, and they ran for their lives.

A fusillade of bolts thudded into the chained man's torso.

Baeloch was firing at him, coldly squeezing off round after round – and wasn't that the right thing to do, the dutiful thing, because the chained man stank of Chaos?

Tarryn's armour was scratched and dented, but he hadn't been injured. Baeloch's bolter was hurting the chained man, making him jerk and twitch, although one wouldn't have known it from his expression. He regarded his attacker with a distant curiosity, and he reached out towards him and began to curl his fingers.

Tarryn snapped up his gun and sighted at the chained man's head.

'*Hold your fire!*'

A grey and black juggernaut burst out of the jungle beside them. Captain Maegar had reached them, two members of his command squad behind him. Inquisitor Halstron was here too, in his onyx and blood red cloak. He weaved between his bulkier allies and barked a few sharp words at the chained man, who lowered his hand.

Tarryn lowered his gun, likewise, as did Baeloch, albeit with a measure of reluctance. 'He isn't what he seems, sir,' the older Relictor protested. 'He… It is some manner of warp-spawned daemon that has–'

'This isn't the time, brother,' the captain growled. *Remember, to question is to doubt.* His voice softened. 'I know you must have concerns,' he allowed.

His remaining squad mates joined them. One was Sergeant Divolio; the other, Tarryn didn't know well enough to identify from his armour's markings. They had run into a bunch of fleeing feral orks and had stopped to deal with them. Their chainsword blades were dark red with ork blood.

'Did I serve you well, master?'

Tarryn was close enough to the chained man to hear his whisper and the inquisitor's reply: 'You served me well.'

'You will sever another link of the chains that bind me.' This time, it wasn't a question. A cloud scudded across Inquisitor's Halstron's rude features, but he inclined his head and confirmed that, yes, he would honour his promise.

The chained man's eyes flashed again, and Tarryn detected the ghost of a smile on his lips. 'Then, today I am content, with the knowledge that one day I shall be free of this prison of cloying flesh.'

The words sent a chill down the Relictor's spine.

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Helsreach, Armageddon Secundus
To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit
Date: 3025999.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Childessa
Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji
Author: General Vladimir Kurov, commander of the Armageddon Steel Legion and head of the ruling military council
Thought for the Day: Honour your Chapter.

Lord Commander. It dismays me to learn that a distress call from my 93rd Regiment, stationed at Hive Infernus, appears to have been disregarded by you. I am assured that, without the urgent reinforcement of the Adeptus Astartes, the city will likely fall. I trust that this is merely an oversight on your part and that the matter will be hastily rectified. I am sure you will agree that naught else takes precedence over the defence of our population centres. Cordially yours.

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NINE

They found Sergeant Juster where they had left him.

His weapons, including his venerable chainsword, had been stripped from him. The feral orks had tried to take his armour too, but had only succeeded in hammering it out of shape. They had killed him, of course.

Baeloch led the way from there to the ambush site. He went a little way ahead of his battle-brothers, scanning for more traps before each step.

Nabori and Kantus were also dead and their bodies picked clean. The orks had managed to pry off Nabori's helmet, though it would do them little good on its own.

'This is wrong.'

The voice in Tarryn's helmet startled him. Baeloch had used their combat squad's frequency, however, so the others – the captain and his command squad – couldn't hear him. At least, he hoped they couldn't.

He reminded his brother of what Maegar always said. 'To question is to doubt and doubt is the–'

'We must ever be alert for the signs of treachery,' Baeloch countered. 'Yes, even and especially in those who are closest to us.'

The captain had taken the inquisitor aside for a private conference. He had removed his helmet to reveal a cracked, leathery face shaded with dark stubble. As the company commander, he had access to all vox-frequencies. He might well have been listening to Tarryn and Baeloch through an earpiece.

He kept it to himself if he was; he didn't spare a glance towards them. However, the chained man, who was standing beside his master with his

head bowed, looked up suddenly, as if sensing eyes upon him. Tarryn turned away from him, quickly.

They took their blades to the already-trampled undergrowth.

On their captain's orders, they hacked, tore and stamped out a square metre of flat ground, into which the inquisitor lowered his weighty frame.

Sitting cross-legged, with the chained man at his shoulder, he produced a small bundle of black cloth from inside his robes. He began to unwrap it, fastidiously. Six Relictors, Tarryn included, craned to see what the cloth contained.

The seventh, however, clapped a hand on Tarryn's arm and the other on Baeloch's. 'A word,' said Sergeant Divolio.

He led the pair of them away from the others. In the shade of a thin, crooked tree with helical purple leaves, he rounded on them. 'Clearly,' he said, 'you have both seen more than you were meant to see.'

'Yes, sergeant,' agreed Tarryn, because it was all he could think of to say.

'You would have been made privy to these matters in time,' the sergeant continued. 'One day, when you were ready to understand.'

Baeloch found his voice. 'I have served almost forty years in this company.'

'You will know, then, that we serve the Emperor well.'

'I know the reason for our penitent crusade,' insisted Baeloch. 'I know of the sin that stains our Chapter's name and for which we must still atone.'

'Some of us believe it was no sin,' said Divolio, quietly. He had chosen to keep his helmet on, so Tarryn couldn't see his expression. Did he look guilty or ashamed of his actions, he wondered? Or was there an implied threat in his eyes?

'De Marche lost his head over it, all the same. And now what? Another heretic inquisitor takes his place? Another fanatic who consorts with daemonkind and allows the depravity of the warp to corrupt his soul?'

Divolio's tone remained calm. 'Inquisitor Halstron saved your lives, Baeloch – yours and Tarryn's – and pray that you never know the price he paid for it.'

'He had to sever a link of the daemon's chains,' said Tarryn, remembering what he had overheard.

Divolio looked at him, hesitated for a moment, then nodded. 'As we speak,

he is risking his life, his sanity and, yes, his very soul, once more for the Emperor's sake. The inquisitor believes he can locate–'

A raw-throated scream drowned out his next words.

It had come from Halstron's direction. Divolio led Tarryn and Baeloch back to where the inquisitor sat, encircled by their battle-brothers. Apparently, now they were ready to bear witness… His spine was rigid. His eyes had rolled back into his skull and his lips were foam-flecked, reminding Tarryn of the mad Guardsman they had encountered. He threw back his head, so fiercely that Tarryn thought his neck might break, and screamed again.

The black cloth lay spread across the inquisitor's knees, and cradled in it was a single twisted shard of obsidian. It began to glow, just faintly at first but then gradually more strongly, growing red and then white until it seemed like it would melt. The mere sight of the shard gave Tarryn a queasy feeling: the same one he always had around the chained man. He didn't doubt that the others felt it too.

'What is it?' Baeloch hissed.

'It's a remnant, a shard, of a powerful weapon,' Divolio answered him.

'A weapon of Chaos.'

'Any weapon is a tool in the hands of he who wields it. We bend the warp itself to our will every time we haul our sky fortress to a new star. We trust in our faith and in the Emperor's grace to shield us. Why should this be any different?'

'You said he was looking for something,' said Tarryn. 'Angron's Monolith?'

'The shard, it seems, is… connected to other parts of the same relic weapon. It led us here to Armageddon. The Chief Librarian's research–'

'Decario knows about this too?'

Divolio ignored Baeloch's interruption. 'He learned of rumours, that the jungle concealed an ancient shrine of diabolic power. It is said to have been erected by cultists of the daemon primarch, but its exact location is unknown. Anyone who ever saw the shrine – the monolith – was driven insane or worse.'

Tarryn nodded. That explained why the captain and the inquisitor had been so interested in the mad Guardsman. It also strengthened his fear that something – something in the jungle, not far from here – had been playing

with his mind. ‘We never actually saw any monolith,’ he reminded Divolio.

‘But you may have brought us close to it, closer than we have been before – close enough that the inquisitor can now–’

For the second time, Halstron interrupted the sergeant with a sound. This time, it was more a gasp than a scream, as if he had been punched in the stomach. He jerked forwards, then back again. His blind eyes stared up at the jungle canopy, while his mouth moved in fervent but silent prayer – to the Emperor, Tarryn hoped.

‘What if he can’t control it?’ asked Baeloch.

Divolio nodded towards Captain Maegar. He stood behind the inquisitor, grim-faced, with one hand resting on his chainsword’s activation rune. ‘Then the captain will honour the inquisitor’s last wish and take his head.’

Halstron drew a great shuddering breath and his shoulders sagged. His eyes had cleared – they could see his pupils again now – and sweat poured from his face. The fiery glow of the shard in his lap dimmed and reluctantly died. He took a moment to steady himself, until Maegar loomed over him, impatiently.

‘Well?’ he prompted, tapping the grip of his blade.

Still breathless, the inquisitor recited a litany of purity. He stumbled over a few words, but still the captain seemed to be satisfied. He extended his sword hand towards Halstron and pulled him to his feet. ‘Did you find it?’ he asked.

‘We were right,’ the inquisitor murmured. ‘It *is* close. The shard, it could sense the other part of itself, so strongly… And they want to be together. It was all I could do to…’ He took another breath. ‘I saw it. The monolith. It couldn’t hide itself from… The shard, the other shard, is at the monolith and I *saw* it.’

‘Can you lead us to it?’ asked Maegar, eagerly.

Halstron nodded. The captain called for water for him, while Halstron called for his aide. The chained man whispered something in the inquisitor’s ear as his master leaned on him. Tarryn couldn’t make it out, but he had no problem imagining the words: *You should have let me do it. You had no need to risk yourself – I could have found your lost treasure for you. It would only have cost you one more link…*

What would have happened to the chained man, Tarryn wondered, if his master had gone mad, if the captain had been obliged to kill him?

What would have become of the inquisitor’s daemon, then?

Captain Maegar summoned Tarryn and Baeloch to him.

He had asked them again what had happened when they approached the monolith, though they could tell him no more than they had already relayed.

He glanced up at the darkening sky. It had been a long day, he considered, and eager as he was to press on and claim the prize that now lay within his reach, perhaps it would be wise on this occasion to exercise prudence.

They would return to base camp, he decided. They would recall the rest of their combat squads to join them. Then, tomorrow, the full complement of the Relictors Fourth Company would descend upon this area in force, and let the jungle try to keep its secrets from them.

They carried their dead back with them. The Techmarines and Apothecaries of their Chapter would want to salvage what they could, the precious gene-seed, their armour and their weapons. Tarryn and Baeloch carried Juster between them. Baeloch, for once, held his tongue, which Tarryn was glad about.

Today, he had discovered a conspiracy – many would say, a heresy – that extended to his Chapter’s highest echelons. He had watched as his captain, on whose orders he would have given his life gladly, had trucked with the forces of Chaos; he had listened while a respected sergeant justified such forbidden rituals to him.

He had learned a dark truth about Relictors history too. The name ‘de Marche’ had not been entirely new to him, but Baeloch had revealed much about the ‘traitor priest’ that he had not known, details he had never been told.

Tarryn knew his duty. *We must ever be alert for the signs of treachery.* He ought to report all he had seen – but to whom? And wasn’t it also his duty to honour his Chapter and therefore its leaders? *Remember, to question is to doubt and doubt is the bane of faith.* He had never felt so confused, so unsure of the right path to take. He had never before doubted that he knew what the Emperor required of him.

Tarryn needed time to think.

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TEN

It had been some time since Decario had travelled in a drop pod. His duties as Chief Librarian, and the keeper of the Relictors' secrets, kept him from the battlefield more often than he would have liked.

The Armageddon skies, however, were perilous – even at the equator – and the safest way to reach the planet's surface was also the fastest way. So, Decario found himself huddled inside a bullet-shaped capsule, sitting across from Chapter Master Bardane and the four members of his honour guard.

He felt the retro-thrusters firing, barely taking the edge off their plummeting speed. He braced himself for the inevitable impact, which sent a shock through his bones despite being largely absorbed by his battlesuit of Terminator armour.

He climbed out of the pod behind the others, treading earth beneath his boots for the first time in over two years. His auto-senses noted the oppressive warmth of the jungle, even though the sun had set, and his armour adjusted its internal temperature accordingly.

They had flattened their own landing site: another benefit of drop pod travel. Their violent arrival would have drawn attention, however. They had put down a short way to the north-east of the Fourth Company's base camp. Veteran Brother Parvhel led them on their way towards it, following the auspex in his helmet.

Bardane kept his helmet on too, and said nothing as they marched. He had tucked the screaming flail into his belt, where it was hidden by a sweeping grey and black cloak and breechcloths.

Sergeant Illonus had likewise concealed his black-bladed gladius, though

this was a comparatively minor artefact. In contrast, Captain Harkus wore his double-headed dreadaxe in plain sight. There was nothing about its aspect, fortunately, that betrayed the weapon's appetite for condemned souls.

The Chapter Master was brooding, thought Decario. He had crossed a line from which there was no turning back. He wasn't the type to entertain regrets – not for his own decisions – but then, nor was he one to break a sacred oath lightly. There would certainly be consequences for the decisions he had taken today, and not only for him but his entire Chapter. But whatever they were, he would face them.

Decario would have to face those consequences too. It was he who had advised his Chapter Master to disobey orders. He had sworn that such was the Emperor's will. Had he offered Bardane another option, he knew he would have taken it gladly. They had to have the shard, though; his dreams had been clear on that point.

Will they take his head as well? the Librarian wondered. *Will they drag him to the axe man's block as they did de Marche? Will I have to bear that additional weight on my conscience? Or, this time, will they drag me to the block alongside him?*

They met a pair of sentries at the edge of the camp. The Space Marines snapped to attention and saluted the Chapter Master as he passed. They must have voxed their captain too, because Maegar emerged from his command centre to greet his visitors.

He led them into the prefabricated building. A handful of his closest aides were present, Inquisitor Halstron among them. For once, the inquisitor was without his pale shadow. He had left his bound daemonhost chained up in his transport ship, he explained when Bardane questioned him.

Captain Maegar proceeded to update them on recent events, giving them the news they had been praying for. 'The inquisitor divined the monolith's bearing and distance,' he revealed. He activated a holoprojector and a bright map of the jungle appeared, floating in the air between them. He enlarged a sector of it and pointed to a skull icon in the middle of a largely uncharted area.

'There it is,' he announced, proudly: at long last, the object of their quest.

There were strategies to be discussed then, by the captain and the Chapter

Master, primarily. Decario left them to it, as he was keen to talk to Inquisitor Halstron. They exchanged formal pleasantries. Halstron had a genial enough manner, at least on the surface, which only made Decario all the less inclined to trust him.

As soon as formality allowed, he asked to see the shard – the one that had been loaned to him from the Relictors Vault. He wanted to be reassured that it was safe. The inquisitor obliged him, unwrapping his bundle of black cloth to display the precious artefact without touching it.

Decario hadn't trusted any member of the Inquisition fully, not since de Marche. Halstron had arrived at the sky fortress, however, with a gift he couldn't resist: the knowledge of where a third shard might be located. Nor could he have presented himself at a more propitious time.

He belonged to a radical faction of the Ordo Malleus, as had de Marche. They followed the teachings of the long-dead Inquisitor Lord Xanthus, believing that the power of Chaos could never be truly vanquished but might be harnessed. Xanthus had been executed for his heresies eight thousand years ago. De Marche had been fond of saying that it was easy enough to destroy a man, but near impossible to destroy an idea.

'There are many of us now,' he had told Decario once, 'more than you might imagine. We are… well, if not exactly tolerated, not in official quarters, then at least a blind eye might be turned to some of our activities.'

The Xanthite way yielded results, de Marche had boasted, and few were wont to argue with results, no matter the risks taken to achieve them. 'Doesn't the Emperor tell us, after all, that the ends always justify the means?'

A month after making that pronouncement, de Marche had been dead. His name had been struck from the Imperial records, his immortal soul condemned to an eternity of torment. Evidently, a blind eye could only be turned so far.

Captain Maegar asked to see Decario after the conference.

He reported that two brothers in his company – two of the uninitiated – had learned about the monolith and had seen Inquisitor Halstron's daemonhost in action.

Decario absorbed the news with equanimity. This had happened before and it would certainly happen again. He asked for the brothers' names and said

he would speak to them tonight.

‘I’ve had a close watch kept on them,’ the captain assured him. ‘We may have a problem with one of them.’

The Librarian examined both the Relictors in question. ‘Baeloch,’ he surmised.

‘A fine warrior,’ said Maegar.

‘I don’t doubt it, and a pious one too. His heart is filled with blood and thunder.’

‘In another Chapter, he might have made a capable leader.’

They had talked about inducting Baeloch into the Conclave, once. He had been entrusted with some of the Relictors’ smaller secrets, to test his reaction. ‘He wasn’t ready,’ said Decario. ‘Some of them never are.’ *How ready was I*, he asked himself, *for the secrets I was forced to learn?*

‘What of Tarryn?’ he asked.

‘He is still young,’ Maegar answered him.

‘Indeed he is. Open-minded too, I think.’ In other company, that might have been regarded as a heinous insult.

Maegar considered the point and nodded. ‘He has doubts.’

‘Naturally he does,’ agreed Decario. ‘It’s been a century and a half since I picked up that damned daemon weapon and still I doubt the path I chose then – the path I have guided this Chapter along – every day and every night.’

‘Doubt is the bane of–’ began Maegar.

Decario interrupted him. ‘If it weren’t for my actions, we would still be Fire Claws. We would still have our world. Don’t you think I should doubt myself occasionally?’

‘The Emperor chose our path for us,’ said the captain.

‘And yet, many would swear that I have misinterpreted His wishes. It is through my doubts, captain – because I question myself every day and seek answers to those questions – that I muster the courage I need to tread that path.’

‘As you say, Chief Librarian,’ Maegar conceded, gruffly.

Decario sighed. ‘I had high hopes for Brother Tarryn. I felt we might be able to share our secrets with him, once he was older, wiser and more experienced. His eyes weren’t meant to see so much, so soon. I pray it won’t set his heart against us.’

He received the two Relictors in the crew compartment of an Aquila lander, where they could talk in private.

They stood before him stiffly. Baeloch's face was stony and he wouldn't meet Decario's probing gaze. The younger Tarryn's expression was equally guarded, but his eyes were more open.

How many did this make, the Librarian wondered? How many like them had he had to face? *How many more times must I explain myself?* Still, he couldn't – and would never – delegate this duty to a subordinate. This was part of his penance.

So, he confessed the existence of the Conclave to them: a sacred trust of Relictors who guarded their Chapter's deepest secrets. He told them that they shared some of those secrets now, and so were a part of that sacred trust too, sworn never to reveal what they had learned. He might well have added, *whether you like it or not.*

For the first time, Baeloch looked him in the eye. 'What would the masters of the Ordo Hereticus say, if they saw what we have seen today? If you truly believe that you are doing the Emperor's will, why then must your deeds be cloaked in silence and shadow? Why not confess your actions before the Inquisition and suffer their judgement?' Tarryn shifted uncomfortably beside him.

He is bitter, thought Decario, *apart from any other reason, because he wasn't entrusted with this knowledge earlier.* Baeloch had cursed the late Inquisitor de Marche's name ten years ago, for bringing disgrace upon his Chapter. Would he curse Decario's name as vehemently now?

The Chief Librarian lowered his heavy, armoured form into a seat. There was so much he couldn't tell them, so much they weren't ready to hear; and though Tarryn might yet have trusted blindly, Baeloch was clearly beyond that. He had to make them understand. 'I want to tell you – the two of you – a story,' said Decario.

'It's an old tale, but younger than I am. It dates back a century and a half, to when I was an Epistolary in a Chapter still known as the Fire Claws. It begins with a ship that dropped out of the warp and drifted into the Stygies System. The ship was a space hulk, known as the *Captor of Sin…*'

It was going to be a long night.

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ELEVEN

Captain Maegar assembled the Fourth Company in front of his command centre.

Tarryn had wondered how much he would choose to tell them. He revealed that an unusual artefact had been discovered, but little more than that. Tarryn's eyes roved over the rigid grey and black figures around him. *How many of them already know the truth?* he asked himself. Not many, he suspected.

Few of his battle-brothers would ever know what they had fought for in this sweltering jungle. Fewer still would ever ask. He wondered what they would think if he told them. How many would turn a blind eye?

The plan was straightforward enough. The company's sixteen combat squads – some had been amalgamated, to bring them up to full strength after taking casualties – would march south-east, towards the artefact's assumed position. They would fan out and surround it, and hopefully draw out any feral orks in its vicinity.

A small elite force of Relictors, comprising Maegar's command squad and Chapter Master Bardane and his honour guard, would wait until the inevitable skirmishes were in progress. Then they would strike out directly towards their prize – and, with the Emperor's grace, encounter minimal resistance along the way.

Decario addressed the troops next. He reminded them to be vigilant against the subtler wiles of Chaos, and he led them in chanted litanies of purity and protection.

Brothers Tarryn and Baeloch had been reassigned. Sergeant Divolio had

already given them their posting. They were to join the captain's command squad, and would therefore be fighting beside the Chapter Master himself.

Baeloch's reaction had been predictable. 'They want to keep us close,' he had grumbled. 'They fear we may not keep their sordid secrets.'

They reported to Divolio dutifully, and waited with the command squad as the others filed out of the clearing ahead of them. Tarryn's stomach tightened as Chapter Master Bardane joined them. He towered over the other Relictors, a palpable presence in his highly decorated artificer armour.

A day ago, he would have considered it a signal honour to serve in his leader's presence. *It* is *an honour,* he told himself firmly, *one of which I must strive to be worthy.* Bardane's standard-bearer was unfurling his banner – *I am marching into battle beneath my Chapter's banner!* – and that still stirred something, a fierce sense of pride, in his primary heart.

'Do we serve the Emperor today?'

Baeloch was voxing him privately again. Apparently, their old squad's frequency was still active. Tarryn answered him confidently. 'Yes. I believe we do.'

He was still conflicted about much of what he had learned, but one thing he didn't doubt. 'I believe the Chief Librarian was sincere, in any case. He believes we are doing the Emperor's bidding, and so who are we to question it?'

'Decario is toying with forces he doesn't understand,' Baeloch retorted, 'and what happens once they overwhelm him?'

'That is why the Conclave exists: to keep vigilance against–'

'But their minds have touched the warp too, and there is always a price for that. What if it is Maegar who succumbs to the corruption of Chaos – or Bardane himself? What if they have already succumbed?'

Tarryn protested loyally, but Baeloch cut him off again. 'They could lead us into the Eye of Terror itself, as de Marche would have done, and who would raise a hand to stop them? Who among us would dare question our orders, before it was too late and our Chapter was burning?'

Tarryn wanted to say, *It won't happen. Our leaders, Artekus Bardane especially, are strong, incorruptible.* But Inquisitor Halstron had strolled up to join their gathering, with the chained man in tow, and Tarryn remembered orks bursting into flames and a hand extended towards a

battle-brother.

He remembered the stink of Chaos, a flash of daemon eyes, and for the hundredth time, he felt his certainties crumbling into sand between his fingers.

I believe we are serving the Emperor.

By rights, their outward journey ought to have been uneventful. They passed only through areas of the jungle already cleared – and in force, an entire Adeptus Astartes company, enough to make any foe think twice about crossing their path.

In the space of one night, however, those areas had been recolonised.

The squads at the company's vanguard took the brunt of frequent feral ork attacks. One sergeant remarked ruefully, over an open vox-channel, that the greenskins were multiplying faster than the Relictors could kill them.

It wasn't long before Tarryn's squad was attacked too.

The orks came at them from the west. The Relictors could hear them before they even registered on their auspexes. What they didn't expect was for a missile to come streaking towards them out of the jungle. It was badly aimed, however, and thudded into an intervening tree.

Around ten orks were bearing down on them, whooping eagerly. At their rear, an oversized brute dropped onto one knee, cradling a crude rocket launcher. It was greenskin technology, unmistakably, but whether it had been stolen from the invaders, salvaged from the previous war or lashed together by the jungle-dwellers themselves, Tarryn could not tell.

Another missile erupted from the launcher's black maw. It flew directly at the Chapter Master's head; he just managed to duck beneath it. The rest of the orks were crashing towards Bardane too, barrelling past other potential targets between them. They must have identified him as their enemies' leader.

His honour guard intercepted over half of them, but that still left Bardane being rushed by four feral orks – and they only had to keep him pinned long enough for the next rocket to hit him. The rest of the Relictors, Tarryn included, hastened to his side. Bardane, however, had drawn a weapon from underneath his cloak.

At first, it looked to Tarryn like a simple flail, and he wondered why a Chapter Master would wield such an unremarkable tool. He should have

known better, as he realised just half a second later.

As Bardane drew back the flail, the tips of its spiked chains flared. Suddenly, there was a shrunken daemon's head upon each of them, formed out of roiling energy. Three shrunken faces contorted in anger and pain – and the daemons were *screaming*.

The sound was like a rusty blade sawing at Tarryn's nerves, but this was nothing compared to the flail's effect on its victim. Its chains lashed across the first feral ork's shoulder, cutting it to the bone, while the daemon heads burrowed deep beneath its tattered flesh, snapping their teeth like tiny carnivorous fish.

Bardane whipped the flail back around and slashed the same ork across the chest on his backhand. It was doubtful whether this second strike was even necessary. The feral ork's thick legs splayed out underneath it and it smacked into the ground, a bloody carcass with its face frozen into an expression of horror.

Its fate gave the other orks pause for just a moment, long enough for Bardane to wrench one of them into the path of the next, and final, missile. As the hapless creature died, so too did its inadvertent slayer. Tarryn charged the ork with the rocket launcher and carved it up before it could reload again.

After that, the rest of the feral orks fell quickly.

Bardane stood over the last of them, with his head bowed and his daemon flail clutched in both hands. He did not move until its angry screams subsided and its energy-formed faces guttered and spat and finally flickered out, receding back from whence they had been summoned. Then, he lifted his chain, tucked the weapon back into his belt and nodded to Captain Maegar, who gave the order to proceed.

'We christened it the Artekus Scourge.' Decario was suddenly looming over Tarryn's shoulder, apparently having read his mind – though that wouldn't have been hard in the circumstances. 'It is one of the most valuable relics we possess and has turned the tide of more battles than either of us could count in the Emperor's favour.'

They returned to the site of the ork massacre. Tarryn knew when they were approaching it because the stink from the untended bodies was riper than ever.

Decario had fallen into step alongside him. He spoke to Tarryn quietly, telling him of a great victory won by Artekus Bardane over the Chaos cult of the Scarlet Vein. He had heard the tale before – of how Bardane had been the battle's sole survivor and was named Chapter Master by his dying predecessor – but only the edited version.

Bardane would have died on that fateful day too, Decario assured him, had he not been wielding the Artekus Scourge. The daemons in the flail had shredded the cultists' souls and ultimately devoured them.

They passed by the area where Tarryn's old squad had been ambushed, where his battle-brothers had perished. Shortly afterwards, the other squads peeled away to the left and right ahead of them.

For the first time, now, they were ploughing into virgin jungle. Thirteen Relictors remained: the captain and his command squad, the Chapter Master and his honour guard, Decario, Baeloch and Tarryn – and then, there was Inquisitor Halstron, too, and his chained prisoner.

How many more of them had weapons like the flail, Tarryn wondered? Was Captain Maegar's chainsword possessed by daemons – or Captain Harkus's axe? And what of Angron's Monolith itself? Decario had had little enough to say about that, only revealing that it was a source of incredible power. *Unholy power.*

They took the same precautions that Sergeant Juster had taken a day earlier. They kept their eyes on their instruments, making sure they didn't wander off course. They had regular sound-offs. They focused on maintaining the barriers around their minds. If the jungle – the monolith lurking in the jungle, rather – tried to turn them around again, they would know about it before they had taken two steps.

They proceeded slowly, allowing the combat squads in front of them to fan out. The furthest two were already out of vox-range and their regular reports had to be relayed to Captain Maegar by squads in between them. When the first ork was sighted, and the first squad came under attack to the east of the monolith's supposed location, the Chapter Master immediately raised a hand to halt their procession.

Tarryn waited and listened for further developments. Another fight soon broke out to the west, and then another. The plan was working.

Above his head, the Chapter standard rippled in the late-morning breeze. He raised his eyes to it, willing it to stir him again. But pride and duty were

at war with the black forces of doubt in his hearts. *Doubt is the bane of faith.*

The white skull on black had been everything to him before. It had represented the ideals to which Tarryn had devoted his life. When he looked at it now, he felt as if the skull were mocking him. Its ideals had been lies.

He asked himself what that banner represented to him now. He prayed to the Emperor for an answer, but no answer came.

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Infernus, Armageddon Secundus
To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit
Date: 3026999.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Rankor
Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji
Author: Commissar Marco Rickarius, 93rd Armageddon Steel Legion
Thought for the Day: An open mind is like a fortress with its gate unbarred and unguarded.

Ghazghkull is here. I repeat, I have confirmation that the ork warlord is leading the siege of Infernus personally. His assembled forces outnumber ours twenty to one. He has called down orbital strikes to shatter our anti-siege cannons. We have rioting on all hive levels. Many citizens have fled into the wastelands, despite the efforts of the local arbiters to stop them. The orks have slaughtered most of them. We cannot hold these walls for much longer. I beseech you, in the name of the Emperor, save us.

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TWELVE

The monolith was immediately ahead of them.

They couldn't see it yet, but they knew it was there. Apart from anything else, Tarryn could feel it. The mere presence of such a powerful Chaos totem caused his stomach to turn over and a dull ache to build behind his eyes.

It had had a physical effect on the surrounding flora, too. Much of it was blistered, blackened and withered by sickness. Vines were oozing yellow pus.

Bloody battles were raging through the jungle around them; they could hear the sounds of some of them in the mid-distance. The vox-net was alive with reports from squad leaders. For every enemy they killed, they swore that three more came at them through the brush, wielding ever more advanced weaponry.

Already, three squads had had to join up with three others, to reinforce them.

They were winning, though. They were keeping the feral orks at bay. Better yet, they were keeping them busy. The auspexes read approximately eighty greenskins still standing guard over the monolith itself. Still, eighty was a good deal better than eight hundred or eight thousand, and against thirteen Space Marines and an inquisitor, it amounted to reasonable odds.

That was unless the orks were drawing power from the monolith itself. If only a handful of them were weirdboyz – like the one that had blasted Tarryn and his brothers four days ago – it might well tip the balance.

We are wielding the powers of the warp ourselves, he remembered. He

didn’t know if that made him feel better or worse.

They let the feral orks come to them – they had made enough noise to attract them – and greeted them with a blizzard of bolter fire. They cut down a few, but the rest knew how to use the trees and their wounded for cover.

Bardane yelled out the Relictors war cry, ‘Strength of will, courage of will!’, but his words were drowned out by the feral orks’ howls and the activation sputters and roars of almost a dozen chainswords. Tarryn might have released a deep-throated roar as well, as the greenskin wave crashed over him.

There was no more room for doubt, then; not as long as he could look into his enemies’ eyes and see the murderous madness within them; not as long as he could hear the vile blasphemies that tripped off their slavering tongues.

Not as long as the enemy’s foul xenos stink was in his nostrils.

These creatures were obscenities in the Emperor’s sight, and for that they deserved to be eradicated. So, every time Tarryn slashed a feral ork with his chainsword blade or punched a hole through one of them with his bolter – every time he drew dark crimson xenos blood – he was doing the Emperor’s will. How could it be otherwise?

His battle-brothers were doing the Emperor’s will too, and mostly with the tools He had provided them with. He could hear the screaming of the Artekus Scourge, however, even when he couldn’t see it; and he was always aware of the chained man’s presence behind him, thanks to the constant prickling across the back of his neck.

Whenever Tarryn could risk it, he glanced over his shoulder to check what the inquisitor’s prisoner – *a bound daemonhost,* Decario had called him – was doing.

In fact, he wasn’t doing much. He stood apart from the battle, apparently content to watch. He wore his hood up and his hands were tucked into the sleeves of his dark robes. Whereas before feral orks had fled at the sight of him, this time they hardly spared him a glance at all.

He’s waiting, waiting for the inquisitor to break another link of his chains, thought Tarryn. *Until then he refuses to act. He won’t even defend himself.*

It was left to Halstron, then, to protect his prisoner, and he was making an admirable job of it. He was showing the steel that lay beneath his mild

facade. He was stronger than he looked. His hammer, swung two-handed, shattered bone and pulverised muscle wherever it struck.

Halstron was fast too – faster than his heavy build and even heavier weapon had led Tarryn to expect. At one point, he took on a trio of opponents at once. He ducked and leaped and twisted out of the way of their ungainly lunges, and answered each of them with a crippling hammer blow.

The next time Tarryn looked, the three orks were on the ground, broken. The inquisitor stood over them, his face shiny and red with perspiration. He raised his hammer to deliver the crushing, killing blow to the first of them, and Tarryn glimpsed a spark of madness in his eyes to rival that of the xenos themselves.

Chief Librarian Decario fought with a chainsword and a force staff. The latter was almost as tall as its wielder was, crowned with the Relictors skull symbol against the Imperial eagle in burnished bronze. When Decario brandished it, lightning arced from the eyes of the skull and the eagle both, racing towards his target.

The touch of any of the bolt's three forks could deprive a feral ork of a hand or a leg below the knee. A triple-pronged strike could blast its victim to ashes.

The staff likely had no power of its own, however. It was simply a conduit for Decario's natural abilities. Like all Librarians, he was a psyker and could bend the unholy energies of the warp to his will. He had grown to adulthood and been trained by the Adeptus Astartes to control his curse, unlike the thousands of other young psychic mutants, carried away by the Black Ships to face an uncertain fate.

There were other Librarians in the Relictors Chapter, more in almost every fortress-monastery across the Imperium. Their presence was tolerated – no, more than that, they were relied upon – and the same was true of the Imperium's Navigators and astropaths. As Sergeant Divolio had asked, *Why should this be any different?* Perhaps he had been right, after all.

If Decario, or the Chapter Master or Inquisitor Halstron, had the strength and courage of will to pick up a daemon weapon and turn its power back against the Emperor's enemies, then how could that be anything but a good thing?

And that power *was* making a difference.

The feral orks' front line had crumpled. A third of them were down already, without having confirmed a kill between them. As Tarryn had feared, however, they had psykers lurking among them. The first of them was foolish enough to trade lightning bolts with the Chief Librarian and quickly ceased to be a problem.

The second was more cunning, hiding in the midst of its own forces. Tarryn could barely see it from where he stood, but vox-reports from his brothers kept him informed of its actions. They said that whip-like energy tendrils emerged from the psyker's head. Instead of punishing its enemies, however, the tendrils brushed against its brutish allies and imbued them with redoubled strength and ferocity.

Tarryn witnessed the truth of this himself, as an ork he had wounded and left to die found its second wind and set about him viciously with its club.

For a moment, it seemed the tide of battle might turn. The feral orks, however, were too badly diminished to capitalise on their late advantage. Captain Maegar rallied his command squad to smash through their defences and took the psyker's head himself.

Tarryn's opponent, so bold a moment ago with its sorcerous edge, remembered that it was losing blood and wilted. A moment later, it lost its life too.

From then on, the battle could more rightly have been termed a slaughter. To the feral orks' credit, none of them tried to run. They fought and died instead. By the end, Tarryn's chainsword had six more kills to add to its story, and he had wounded at least two orks in addition, which his battle-brothers had finished off. In such exalted company, he considered that he had held his own.

Behind him, Inquisitor Halstron had fallen to his knees. He looked like he had at the ambush site last night: exhausted, not just from his outward exertions but from some titanic inner struggle. *The obsidian shard*, Tarryn realised.

Chief Librarian Decario hurried to him, knelt awkwardly beside him and spoke to him quietly. Tarryn couldn't hear his voice, but he saw Halstron respond with a fierce shake of the head. 'I can control it,' he insisted. 'My mind… my mind is strong and I have faith in the Emperor. I *will* control it!'

Maegar sent two Relictors to help the inquisitor to stand. Tarryn hadn't known the man long, but it struck him in that moment that he looked older

than he had, older and more weary.

He concentrated on his own wargear, making urgent repairs to his cracked and battered power armour. He spared a glance for Baeloch, who had fought as fiercely and as well as any battle-brother had despite his evident misgivings. He had nothing to say about it now, though. When Tarryn tried to talk to him, he responded only with a sullen grunt.

A wounded ork stirred in the trampled undergrowth, straining to reach its dropped weapon. Captain Harkus swung his double-bladed axe and cleaved it through the stomach. Tarryn thought he heard the exuberant cackling of daemonic voices, though he might well have imagined it. Chapter Master Bardane had returned his flail to his belt, but its terrible screams still echoed in Tarryn's head.

We won the battle, he told himself. *We destroyed the Emperor's enemies and that is all that matters. The ends justify the means.*

They had won, and it was time to reap the fruits of victory.

Captain Maegar sent two battle-brothers ahead of them, to scout the final few strides between them and their prize. It took them longer than expected to report back to him, and Tarryn feared, illogically, that the jungle might have swallowed them whole.

By now, the Relictors had patched up their armour, their weapons and their wounds, and had formed up into lines again, ready and eager to advance. They waited in silence until, finally, the vox-net crackled with a hushed voice. 'It's here. We've found it.'

Tarryn's brothers celebrated that announcement, but in a muted way, it seemed to him. Like him, they were wary of what still lay ahead of them.

Chapter Master Bardane remained silent. He ordered his force forward with a gesture, and Tarryn fell into step among his brothers, although his stomach and his legs alike felt heavy. He kept his head down and took one step after another. Almost before he knew it, he had emerged into a large, round clearing, from which the jungle seemed to have shrunk in revulsion.

And, at last, there it stood before him…

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THIRTEEN

‘What can you see?’

Bardane had stationed his forces – all but for the Chief Librarian, the two captains and the inquisitor – around the edge of the clearing to stand sentry. He had watched as Decario and Halstron had circled their precious find, inspecting it from every angle.

It was Halstron who stopped before the south face of the edifice and indicated something above his head. Decario and Bardane joined him, and their eyes followed his pointing finger upwards. ‘Is that it?’ the Chapter Master asked. The Chief Librarian nodded and said that he believed it was.

From where he stood, on the monolith’s far side, Baeloch couldn’t see what was happening; hence his voxed question to Tarryn, who only had to turn his head.

Tarryn didn’t want to look at the thing in the centre of the clearing. At the same time, he found he couldn’t help himself. He felt as if a spell had been cast over him, one of dreadful fascination. More than once, he tore his gaze away determinedly, to prove that he could, and stared outwards into the jungle, but every time he looked back again.

The monolith stood about twelve metres tall, half that span long and wide. It was made up of dozens of mismatched blocks of stone, somehow fused together – by the energies of the warp itself, perhaps. Images had been carved inexpertly into those stones: of bloodied weapons, leering mutants and screaming daemons.

Tarryn recalled the mad Imperial Guardsman’s babblings, about glaring hateful eyes. Whenever he turned his back on the carved daemons, he was

sure he could feel their malevolent glares burning into him.

The monolith bristled with splinters of wood and metal, jammed into the gaps between the stones. They were remnants of weapons: the fractured, rusted blades of daggers, fragments of grenade casings, arrowheads, the mangled stock of an Imperial lasgun. The glint of a small red gem caught Tarryn's eye, and he saw that it was gripped in a ring of tarnished bronze, perhaps once a sword pommel.

The stones are bound together by hatred and blood, he thought. There was fresh blood on the monolith too, dark red, smeared across its eastern face, a recent offering.

'What can you see?' asked Baeloch through his earpiece again, more insistently. So, Tarryn told him. He told him about the long, glistening black sliver that Inquisitor Halstron had spotted, embedded in the monolith's side.

'How do we get it out of there?' asked Bardane. 'Is it safe to touch it?'

The inquisitor replied that certain rituals might weaken the monolith's grip upon the shard. He admitted, when pressed, that those rituals were both risky and time-consuming. There hadn't been a report from the Relictors combat squads in several minutes. That meant they were holding their own against the orks, keeping them from returning to the clearing and discovering the intruders here. Still, as Bardane pointed out bluntly – and Decario agreed – time was hardly on their side.

'I should have brought along a Techmarine,' the Chapter Master grumbled, 'with a claw arm on his servo-harness.'

'No, brute force alone won't suffice,' Decario advised him. 'The shard is embedded not only in the stone, but in the solidified substance of the warp itself. To release it, one must possess great strength of arms, yes, but also–'

'Strength of will, courage of will,' the Chapter Master summarised for him, brusquely. He turned to Halstron. 'Inquisitor?'

Halstron shook his head. 'I have wielded one shard of the artefact today and it near consumed me. I dare not handle a second. Nor would I advise you to do so while you still hold the flail.'

'Then the task falls to me, as I always knew it must,' Decario stated. 'I have kept my hands free and my mind clear for precisely this purpose.'

He took a small step forwards. In his armour, he was significantly taller than Halstron, and he had a longer reach. Unlike the inquisitor, he would be able to get to the shard easily.

‘A monument built to a daemon primarch,’ Baeloch snorted, ‘for God-Emperor knows what purpose – what else do they need to know about it? We ought to summon a battle-barge here and flatten this whole sector of the jungle. Destroy the monolith and keep its Chaos taint from spreading any further.’

Bardane instructed Decario to remove his helmet. ‘I need to see your eyes,’ he explained; and Tarryn recalled how, when Halstron had been in his shard-induced trance, Captain Maegar had stood by with his chainsword readied.

Tarryn was startled when he saw the Chief Librarian’s face. Decario had served with the Chapter for hundreds of years, but before it had seemed that age had only strengthened him. Now, his skin had the pallor of old parchment, as if he had been sapped of his life’s energy. When had that happened?

Decario planted his feet in front of Angron’s Monolith. He raised his arms towards it until his gauntlets hovered over the obsidian shard. ‘Try not to touch the stone,’ the inquisitor cautioned him, though the warning was surely unnecessary.

Decario closed his eyes tightly and recited a prayer.

‘What are they doing now?’ Tarryn ignored Baeloch’s impatient question. If the Chapter Master wanted him to know, he reasoned, he would have let him see.

In any case, it felt wrong to break the silence that had settled over the clearing, even with a voice that nobody else could hear. It felt to Tarryn like an uncommon, almost sanctified silence. In the heart of it, even the Chief Librarian’s voice faded, although his dry lips continued to move.

Decario drew in a deep breath and grasped the shard with both hands.

His entire body stiffened and began to convulse. Bardane’s hand went to his belt, but Decario brought the shaking under control. He breathed again. He ground his teeth, the veins in his cheeks bulging, as he pulled with all his strength; but the obsidian shard remained held by the stone, unmoveable.

After what seemed like an eternity of struggle, Decario’s shoulders slumped and he breathed out heavily. His hands, however, remained stubbornly in position as he girded himself to try again. In a weak, raspy voice, he called for the inquisitor.

‘I’m here,’ said Halstron, at his shoulder.

‘The shard… We were right,’ Decario whispered. ‘I can feel it, feel the shape of the artefact in my mind. I can feel it… feel its power.’

Halstron drew closer to him. ‘Then it is as we thought?’

Decario nodded, eagerly. ‘A shard… Another shard of Angron’s axe.’

Tarryn felt his throat contracting. Had he heard that right? The shard – both shards, the one embedded in the monolith and the one in the inquisitor’s cloth – they were fragments of a daemon prince’s own weapon?

Decario’s eyes snapped open, and suddenly they were burning with madness: the same as that with which the inquisitor had been afflicted earlier. He blinked and dampened the flames. ‘We must… must have this…’ he insisted, and he strained and pulled at the embedded shard again, to no avail.

‘The shards are stronger in each other’s presence,’ said Halstron. He sounded concerned. ‘I should take mine away.’

Decario’s eyes had closed again. ‘No. It is the Emperor’s will that I master this relic. It will gift to me its strength, its own strength, the strength I need to work it loose and…’ His voice trailed off and, for a long, agonising moment, he was still.

It was in that moment that the inquisitor turned to the chained man.

He was watching impassively, as always, that faint smile playing about his lips again as he met his master’s gaze. Halstron set his jaw and turned away from him, to Tarryn’s considerable relief. No doubt, the chained man could have plucked the shard with ease, but what terrible power might it have bestowed upon him?

Baeloch voxed him again. His voice sounded leaden. ‘I have made a decision. I am sworn to honour our leaders, but I cannot – I will not – stand by as their actions stain our Chapter’s name. I must do my duty to the Emperor.’

Tarryn didn’t ask him what he meant by that. He held his tongue until Baeloch prompted him. ‘Do you stand with me on this, Brother Tarryn?’

‘No,’ he said, without really knowing where the answer had come from.

It was a moment before Baeloch spoke again. ‘Some would judge you a heretic too,’ he said at length, ‘because you knew what was happening and said nothing.’

‘They may,’ agreed Tarryn, but the prospect didn’t worry him as perhaps it

ought to have done. He was more than just a rank-and-file Space Marine now, as proud and noble a calling as that was. Sergeant Juster, in his final minutes of life, had entrusted him with an even higher duty.

‘You share their secrets now, and will likely share their fate,’ Baeloch warned. ‘I won’t be able to protect you.’

‘You must do as you feel the Emperor wills,’ said Tarryn, calmly. ‘As I must too. I trust my leaders to speak with His voice and to hold strong against the corruption of Chaos. I trust the Chief Librarian to advise them wisely. I will honour my Chapter.’

Decario was clinging doggedly to the shard, but his eyes were still closed. He hadn’t moved in almost a minute. Bardane gripped him by his shoulder. ‘Open your eyes,’ he barked. ‘Open your eyes and look at me. That’s an order.’

The Librarian did as he was bidden, with some effort. Bardane snatched off his helmet and glared at Decario fiercely. ‘We must have this artefact. That is what you told me, isn’t it? That is what you have had me believe. We need the shard in our possession if we are to weather the tides to come. Our brothers have died for this, Decario. I sold our souls for this. Would you have all that be for nothing?’

Decario mumbled something that Tarryn couldn’t hear.

The Chapter Master persisted, ‘The Emperor chose your path for you, and He granted you all the strength you need to tread it. You have seen the bloody eye and divined the direful future it portends. You have the Emperor’s strength in you and you must follow the path for His sake. For all our sakes.’

The sermon seemed to be having the desired effect.

Decario set his jaw grimly. He hauled his chin up to glower at the captive shard, his eyes ablaze as if fixed upon a mortal enemy. His muscles strained and his servo-motors howled as he made a third attempt to yank the shard free. And this time, at last, it gave a little, causing tiny chips of stone to break loose and skitter down the monument’s side. Tarryn’s hearts leapt in anticipation. *He’s doing it*, he thought.

And then, Angron’s Monolith *screamed*.

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Helsreach, Armageddon Secundus
To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit
Date: 3029999.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Childessa
Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji
Author: General Vladimir Kurov, commander of the Armageddon Steel Legion and head of the ruling military council
Thought for the Day: Nobody is innocent; there are merely varying levels of guilt.

Lord Commander. I must express my displeasure with the conduct of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter under your command. From your dispatches, it is clear that the Relictors have flagrantly disobeyed orders, to the detriment of our resistance efforts in the name of the Emperor. I have had to divert forces I can ill afford to spare from Hive Acheron to defend Hive Infernus, jeopardising the security of both cities. I name the Relictors and their Chapter Master, Artekus Bardane, as oath-breakers, and demand that they be called to account for their actions before a military tribunal. I trust I have your loyal support in this matter. I have copied my report to the Master of the Administratum on Holy Terra, for his edification.

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FOURTEEN

It was a scream of unadulterated rage, and it hit Tarryn like a thunder hammer to the skull. The ache behind his eyes exploded and the world was washed in shades of red.

He adjusted his auto-senses to filter out the dreadful sound as best they could.

Chapter Master Bardane jammed his helmet back on, presumably having had the same thought. Chief Librarian Decario had let go of the shard – still embedded in the stone above his head, though its jagged edge protruded further now – and slid to the ground with an uncharacteristic howl. His ears were bleeding.

Inquisitor Halstron helped Decario on with his helmet. How he was still standing, Tarryn didn't know. Perhaps his shard was lending him strength again.

He made out voices now, too many of them talking at once: the voices of the combat squad leaders over the vox-net. They could hear the sound too, though they couldn't make out where it was coming from. One sergeant remarked that it sounded as if the earth itself were in agony.

They reported that the feral orks were on the run. Most of them had simply broken off their attacks, even where they had had the upper hand, and fled.

Chapter Master Bardane's voice interrupted the babble, his command channel automatically taking priority. He ordered his sentries to close around the monolith. Even as they did so, Tarryn heard footsteps coming towards them and, belatedly, realised the function of the monolith's scream. It was a call to arms.

He backed up almost to the monolith itself, with Sergeant Divolio to his left and Veteran Brother Parvhel to his right. ‘Defend the Chief Librarian at all costs,’ Bardane bellowed, as the first feral orks poured into the clearing around them. *How could so many of them have made it back here so quickly?*

The Chapter Master drew the Artekus Scourge. Tarryn had to settle for his regular chainsword and bolter, but he knew how to use them and the weapons had acquired a taste for greenskin blood. He shook his head to clear it as he activated his blade.

With battle-brothers to either side of him and the monolith at his back, the feral orks could only get to him one or two at a time. That gave him the advantage over them, being stronger than any three of them.

He favoured his melee weapon, as he was beginning to run low on ammunition. He used his boltgun only when he had to: when his chainsword choked on knotted muscle tissue and he needed a moment to restart it.

He swung his blade, squeezed his trigger and weathered scores of axe and club blows in return. A lucky strike dented Tarryn’s helmet; another one, moments later, split one of his pauldrons. He soon lost count of the number of opponents he had slain. Their bodies were piling up at his feet, yet it seemed that the number of xenos still fighting was only increasing.

The clearing was heaving with feral orks by now. They were snarling and howling and elbowing and trampling each other in their frenzy to reach their surrounded prey. *Where are they all coming from?* Tarryn wondered again. *And where is the rest of our company?* Bardane had summoned his scattered combat squads, but so far only one had made it here: they were firing into the greenskin pack from behind, but had had to fall back or risk being swarmed by them.

Divolio lobbed a frag grenade into the feral orks’ ranks. As tightly packed as they were, the explosion wreaked carnage upon them. It also sent a heavy brute stumbling into Tarryn, almost knocking him off his feet. The vox-net was abuzz with confused reports from the combat squads. They had tried to follow the sounds of battle, rushing to their brothers’ aid as they had been instructed; instead, they found themselves inexplicably lost in the jungle.

Halstron was still trying to haul Decario to his feet. He was urging him to reach for the obsidian shard again. At some point, he must have unleashed

his bound daemonhost – their plight was certainly serious enough to warrant it – because the chained man had joined the melee, causing feral orks to combust with a flex of his fingers. *Another link broken…*

The orks didn't run from the chained man, this time. They were no longer afraid of him; either that or their fear was overridden by the scream of the monolith, the latter driving their hearts to beat harder, pumping white-hot fury through their arteries.

Divolio was down.

It had happened in the blink of an eye. Tarryn hadn't even seen the blow that had felled him. He couldn't tell if the sergeant was unconscious or comatose or dead. All he knew was that where a moment ago he had had a battle-brother protecting his flank, there were now two feral orks

One hulking great beast, with a splinter of bone through its nose, pushed off from Divolio's prone form and descended on Tarryn from above. It brought a massive axe down, two-handed, in a shattering blow to Tarryn's wrist. He lost his grip on his chainsword, and his bolter chose that inopportune moment to run dry.

He only needed a second to reload. He didn't have it. The ork swung for his throat next; he barely managed to duck under its axe blade in time.

He had a gladius sheathed at his hip, in reserve. His right wrist, however, was broken and his fingers were numb. He had to drop his bolter and draw the short sword left-handed. He plunged it into the feral ork's stomach, up to the hilt, drenching his arm in its blood. The creature gave a step, with Tarryn's blade buried in its guts, drawing him after it. He twisted the blade, eliciting a howl from his opponent; but then he stumbled over Divolio's body, and the blood-slickened grip of the gladius slid out of his grasp too and he was unarmed.

Another feral ork slammed into him and sent him sprawling.

He could probably have caught himself had he not, at the crucial instant, felt a stab of anxiety about touching Angron's Monolith. He imagined the Chaos power it contained coursing through him, shrivelling his soul.

A club smashed into his side – the same spot at which he had been injured several days earlier, though the wound had healed by now – and suddenly, Tarryn was not just stumbling but falling. He glanced off the monolith on his way down, and it felt like stone, nothing more than normal stone.

He found himself on his back, in a heap at the monolith's base, with a

cluster of orks looming over him. They were jostling for the honour of delivering the coup de grâce, which was all that was keeping him alive. Tarryn's closest brother, Parvhel, was battling his way towards him, but had no hope of making it in time.

He needed a weapon.

He fumbled for one with his left hand, his unbroken hand. His chainsword had to be lying close by, along with any number of clubs and axes in the rigid grips of the dead. His questing fingers found something like a blade, and closed eagerly around it. It might have been his own gladius, but as he hefted it, he knew it wasn't. It was too short, for a start, and its balance was off.

Whatever he was holding, though, it was solid and its twisted edges were sharp. It would do for Tarryn's purposes – it was certainly better than nothing.

A feral ork lunged at him, intending to tear out his throat with its tusks. Instead, it was impaled on his new weapon. It died on top of him, with an expression of injured surprise. Tarryn planted a foot in the creature's stomach, and he thrust its corpse away from him into its thronged brethren.

He braced his shoulders against the monolith and pushed himself up onto his elbows and feet. The feral orks seemed to be moving in slow motion; by the time they came at him again, to his own surprise, he was standing and ready for them.

He swung his weapon twice before they could touch him. Its sharp edge opened the throat of his nearest attacker, spilled guts out of the next. A third feral ork aimed a clumsy axe blow at him, which Tarryn evaded with ease. Before the ork had even finished its swing, he had stabbed it through the heart.

It was only then, as he wrenched his weapon out of the dying ork's chest, that he saw what he was holding: an obsidian splinter, about a third of a metre long, scuffed and chipped and twisted. He was holding the shard from the monolith. *The shard of Angron's axe!*

Tarryn ought to have been horrified. Deep down, a small part of him was. A larger part, however, was grateful. He didn't know where the shard had come from, how it had made it into his hand, but he would certainly have been dead without it.

He wasn't dead. Instead, he was slaughtering the enemies of the Emperor,

the xenos scum that had dared infest this Imperial world. It must have been the Emperor Himself who had brought the shard to him so that Tarryn could do His holy work.

Two feral orks rushed him at once, from either side. He handed off the one to his right, hardly noticing the bones grinding in his wrist and a lance of pain shooting up his right arm. The ork to his left howled and bled as the jagged point of Tarryn's shard slashed it across the eyes.

He remembered the Chief Librarian's words last night: *'When I picked up the Excoriator's sword,'* he had mumbled reflectively, *'for all that I was afraid of, even sickened by, the power it possessed – for all I denied it to myself, for days and even months afterwards – in the heat of that moment, there was no doubt. I simply knew. I saw the path that the Emperor had chosen for me.'*

Tarryn knew, now, exactly what Decario had meant.

The monolith's rage was pounding in his head and the world was turning red again. He was stronger and faster than before, he was unstoppable, and he was doing the Emperor's will, so why question it? *To question is to doubt*, he thought, *and doubt is the bane of faith*. If he stopped to question what he was doing, he would die.

So, Tarryn embraced the rage and the redness and the weapon, the shard, clutched tightly in his hand, and he whispered a prayer to the Emperor, which built into a scream as he threw himself headlong into the battle and lost himself in it.

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FIFTEEN

Tarryn. Brother Tarryn. Listen to me. Can you hear my voice?

Tarryn could hear it, but distantly, almost drowned out by the screaming in his head. The voice was urging him to do something, but he couldn't understand it.

There is only the Emperor. Say it with me.

He wished the voice would go away, stop bothering him. It was dragging him back to a place he didn't want to be. The voice spoke incessantly of faith and honour and duty, reminding him of a burden he thought he had finally lain down.

It was saying a name, reminding him of a man he had once known: *Tarryn. Nico Tarryn. Brother Tarryn.*

'There is only…' another voice rasped. He felt the words burning in his throat and bleeding over his lips and he recognised that this voice was his. 'There is only the Emperor, and He…' *He has chosen this path for me, the path I must tread, the path that leads towards the voice.*

Tarryn was on his knees – *When did I fall?* – in the jungle, with ugly black flowers sprouting up to his chest. His right wrist was throbbing and the scream in his head had suddenly ceased, silence rushing in to fill the void it had left. A fuzzy, pale shape hovered in front of him.

He blinked and recognised the grey face of Chief Librarian Decario. He was kneeling before Tarryn, hands outstretched towards him, an urgent plea in his eyes. 'You must let go of the artefact, Brother Tarryn,' he said quietly.

Tarryn gaped at him, blankly. He was sweating profusely in his armour.

The Librarian glanced down at Tarryn's hands, which were resting in his

lap. His fingers were fastened around something sharp and black. It had cut through the ceramite of his gauntlets and into his palms, deep enough to draw blood. He was plastered in blood, he suddenly realised, only some of it his own.

‘What happened?’ he whispered, hoarsely.

‘You heard the Chief Librarian, Tarryn,’ barked a familiar voice behind him. ‘Hand the artefact over to him. Now.’

Tarryn stiffened. ‘Yes, sir,’ he said, and he tried to lift his arms but his muscles ignored his commands. His stomach tightened. His Chapter Master had given him an order, but he hadn’t… he couldn’t…

Strength of will, courage of will, he told himself fiercely.

He closed his eyes and recited the words in his mind, tried to fill his head with them until there was nothing but the words. He felt Decario’s hands around his. They took hold of the shard. Somehow, though he couldn’t bring himself to hand it over, Tarryn managed to relax his fingers and let the shard be eased away from him.

A tidal wave of nausea broke over him, and he had to straighten his arms to catch himself as he pitched forwards. Runes flashed inside his helmet and his auto-injectors pumped a dizzying cocktail of stimulants into his bloodstream.

He was trembling; he couldn’t help himself.

He forced himself to raise his head, to look up, to find Bardane looming over him. The Chapter Master told him to remove his helmet, which he did. He glared into Tarryn’s eyes, his frown lines deepening. Then he nodded to Decario, approvingly, and turned away.

It was only as Bardane took his hand away from his belt that Tarryn realised it had been resting there.

Decario had wrapped the shard in a black cloth and lowered it into a small wooden chest, which he bound with iron chains. He bent forwards and placed a pair of steadying hands on Tarryn’s shoulders. ‘What do you remember?’

He remembered rage and hatred and blood and orks fleeing from his terrible wrath. He remembered the screaming in his head and his temples pounding fit to burst. He remembered his fingers gouging flesh from his enemies’ hides, and he remembered carving them up with his misshapen obsidian blade.

He didn’t remember leaving the clearing in which Angron’s Monolith stood, and yet somehow he was elsewhere in the jungle. Other members of the captain’s command squad stood around him, although Maegar himself wasn’t present.

Most of Bardane’s honour guard, including his standard-bearer, were here too. They were tending to fresh wounds. The bodies of several feral orks – and one battle-brother – lay half buried in the undergrowth.

‘It was a long and hard-fought battle,’ said Decario, ‘and you fought longer and harder than any of us. You ploughed into the feral orks like a whirlwind. They couldn’t seem to lay a hand on you. You kept them in disarray, long enough for more combat squads to find us. You certainly shifted the odds in our favour.’

‘We beat them?’ asked Tarryn. ‘We won?’

‘They finally broke and tried to flee. You went against Captain Maegar’s orders and pursued them.’

‘No, I couldn’t have,’ he protested. He remembered, though, chasing the Emperor’s enemies through the jungle. He remembered how determined he had been to punish them for their sins, to see them dead. He didn’t remember being ordered to desist. He didn’t remember his captain being present at all, nor any of his battle-brothers.

‘I mustn’t have heard him,’ he ventured, ‘with the screaming in my ears.’

…but that can’t be right, because I would never have abandoned them, even if I were faster than the rest of them were, faster than the feral orks…

The Chief Librarian shook his head. ‘The monolith had fallen silent, by then. Had it not, I doubt the orks would have been able to run at all.’

But that isn’t possible, Tarryn wanted to argue, *because the scream only ended a moment ago.* He had still been able to hear it, he was sure, when he had caught up to his prey and sent the first of them crashing into the next, from behind. *Right here*, he thought. *That must have been right here,* though it felt like it had happened worlds away and days ago.

There *had* been someone… Another memory, an urgent memory, was surfacing through the fog that enshrouded the past hour of his life. He remembered a figure standing obdurately in front of him, attempting to bar his path. He had taken off his helmet and was yelling in Tarryn’s face, but Tarryn couldn’t make out what he was saying. ‘Brother Baeloch,’ he whispered.

He followed the telltale flicker of Decario's eyes, to the armoured body in the undergrowth. His sickness had been subsiding, but now a fresh wave of it rolled over him. He tried to scramble towards the body, but he wasn't yet strong enough and Decario had to steady him again.

'Brother Baeloch is dead,' said the Chief Librarian, not unkindly.

Tarryn felt numb. 'I remember… He tried to stop me.' *He was standing between me and my righteous vengeance, and I remember how angry that made me, so angry that I had to… I… I had the shard in my hand and I…*

'He tried to make you drop the shard. I advised him that you, only you, could shake its influence over you. I told Baeloch to stand aside, but he was too stubborn to listen to me. He believed he was saving your soul.'

'I killed him, didn't I?' said Tarryn. 'I killed my brother.'

'You saved my life, Brother Tarryn. Hold on to that. When I was at my weakest, it was you who kept the feral orks away from me. It was you who turned the power of the monolith against them, and fought them until no more remained to fight.'

I didn't want to hurt him, thought Tarryn, *but he wouldn't get out of my way. Why wouldn't he get out of my way?*

'Do you have the strength to stand?' Decario asked him.

He wasn't sure if he did, but he tried and with a little help, he succeeded. 'The remainder of your company has returned to your base camp,' said Decario. 'Now that we have you, and the shard, we should hasten to join them. The Chapter Master has ordered that we leave Armageddon as quickly as possible.'

'Leave?' echoed Tarryn. 'But the war–'

'With the Emperor's will, Warlord Ghazghkull will indeed be defeated. But our Chapter will play no further part in that victory. We have fulfilled our purpose on this world and have other wars to fight. He has chosen a different path for us.'

Two Relictors hoisted Baeloch's body between them, and Tarryn felt a painful stab of guilt as they passed him. 'I don't even… I don't know how the shard got into my hand. It was stuck in the side of the monolith.'

'Perhaps my efforts loosened it, after all. Perhaps the violence of the battle vibrated it free. Perhaps it landed, unnoticed, among our brothers and was kicked along the base of the monolith to you. Perhaps that is how it happened.'

He was yelling in my face, the scream was pounding in my head and I just wanted him out of my way and the shard went straight through his breastplate and…

‘He was right,’ said Tarryn. ‘Baeloch was right. I couldn’t control it.’

‘I’d say you controlled it well enough,’ Decario assured him. ‘You saved your company today, and, in acquiring the shard where I failed, perhaps our entire Chapter.’

…and if Baeloch had lived, he would have gone to the Inquisition with what he knew and that would have been the end of the Relictors, so perhaps…

…perhaps, his death…

Bardane gave the order to move out, and Decario walked with Tarryn, ready to support him should he need it. They were joined by Inquisitor Halstron. His bound daemonhost followed him, but his presence didn’t bother Tarryn as it had. He was glad to see that the pale man was still a prisoner, that at least some links of his chains remained intact. The inquisitor regarded Tarryn for a moment, coolly. Then, much to his surprise, he favoured him with a small, approving nod.

The Emperor has chosen this path for me, he told himself, but whenever he closed his eyes, he saw the face of Baeloch, his brother, and heard his accusing voice: *You are toying with forces you don’t understand… Your mind has touched the warp and there is always a price for that… What if you have already succumbed?*

‘God-Emperor, forgive me,’ Tarryn prayed.

Chief Librarian Decario looked at him in surprise, and then his lips twitched as if he were remembering some private joke and trying not to smile at it.

‘There is nothing to forgive,’ he said.

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Priority level: Magenta Alpha
Transmitted: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*
To: Master of the Administratum, Holy Terra
Date: 3031999.M41
Transmitter: Astropath Prime Galdorian
Receiver: Astropath-terminus Stranx
Author: Lord Commander Dante, Blood Angels Chapter Master
Thought for the Day: Knowledge is power – hide it well.

The Relictors Chapter has departed from Armageddon. I instructed the blockade to allow their Thunderhawks to pass. I take full responsibility for this decision. The only other option would have been a violent confrontation, which we can ill afford at present. I have repeatedly tried to contact Chapter Master Bardane, without success. I will prepare a fuller report for you in due course, and forward copies of all relevant communication log entries to you. We will need to discuss this matter at some length.

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SIXTEEN

The stained-glass windows of the fortress-monastery had been shuttered.

It had generated a protective bubble about itself in preparation for being towed through warp space. It took the entire Relictors fleet to move the Ramilies-class star fort in this manner, and the journey was fraught with peril.

Decario, however, was confident that his Chapter would survive. The Emperor had chosen a path for them to follow, and this was not where it ended. Today, they had harnessed the power of Chaos again and lived to tell of it; this would be no different.

Once again, he followed a series of winding staircases to the lowest part of the sky fortress. He stood before a solid iron door. Once again, a battle-brother stood in front of the door beside him. This time, it was the newest and youngest member of his Chapter's secret Conclave.

Decario stood patiently in the light of the Vault's black candles, as Tarryn explored. His eyes drank in the diminished collection of relics, with a sense of wonder tempered by a healthy respect. He didn't need to be told that every artefact on display had been acquired at a price. He had already learned that lesson.

He lingered before the daemon-possessed dreadaxe, which Captain Harkus had wielded to such noteworthy effect on Armageddon. He examined the fragments of an ancient Chaos talisman, which Decario himself had unearthed on Pythenia and pieced together. He asked about the Artekus Scourge, and Decario showed him the gilded reliquary in which it had once again been frozen.

He halted, finally, by the carved pedestal in the centre of the room. He peered through its dome at the two obsidian shards nestled in their bed of crushed velvet, and he asked about the third, the one he had taken from Angron's Monolith.

'I took it to the purifying chamber,' Decario explained. 'I have Librarians praying over the shard day and night, attempting to tame the daemon within it. They will bind it with powerful wards and seals to keep the daemon force contained.'

Tarryn nodded, sombrely. 'It was in my head, wasn't it? It smashed its way through my defences and it was screaming in my head, goading me until I lost myself to its rage. I don't even remember fighting it. I only know I did because you told me–'

'You didn't fight it,' Decario interrupted him. *Not like I tried to fight it, the first time.* 'Thank the Emperor for that mercy. Had you attempted to resist the shard's power, it is likely your mind would have snapped.'

Tarryn stared at him, uncomprehendingly. That hadn't been what he had expected to hear. 'You are young,' the Chief Librarian explained, 'still trusting, still innocent. Your faith in the Emperor is absolute – and that, nothing else, is what saved you. The power of Chaos flooded into your mind, but it could find no foothold there.'

'I am no longer innocent.' Tarryn glared at Decario again, as if defying him to disagree. It had been a day and a half since Decario had sat across from him, in a shuttle in a clearing in the heart of an alien jungle, and his eyes had been bright and clear and open, then. He appeared much older in the candlelight, today.

Decario wouldn't lie to him. *Not again.* 'The shard has left its mark on you, on your soul, and nothing can be done to erase it, as I know only too well,' he confirmed. 'However, I can teach you rituals and prayers that will enable you to know that part of yourself and find strength in it. I can teach you how to wield the tools of Chaos – that is, should you choose to tread this most treacherous of paths alongside me.'

'The Emperor has chosen my path for me,' declared Tarryn, without a moment's hesitation, 'and I will do as He wills me.'

No matter where it might ultimately lead you? Decario wondered, but he didn't give voice to the words.

He thought about the tense events of the previous night. Bardane had

summoned the Chapter's fleet of Thunderhawks to the Armageddon jungle. It had taken two trips to evacuate the Relictors. The Fourth Company had been slow to reassemble and so had been in the second group to board, along with Decario and the Chapter Master himself. The Imperial Navy had let their ships pass once, but not a second time.

Bardane had claimed to have urgent Chapter business, and demanded that the battleships in his way stand down. The lord admiral in command of the blockade had declined and insisted that the Relictors return to the planet and do their duty. Any problems, he had said, should be taken up with Lord Commander Dante.

Bardane had replied that if the blockade didn't part for him, he would punch a hole through it. He was badly outgunned, but he was counting on the fact that no one wanted a fight, not here and not now.

The standoff had lasted four hours, during which time Bardane's resolve had never wavered, at least not visibly. Decario could only wish for half his confidence. Bardane had known this day would come, however, and had long since prepared himself to face it. In the end, his instincts had been proven correct. Dante himself had intervened in the dispute, and – after his overtures to his fellow Chapter Master had been ignored – he had had the blockade ships stand down.

He wouldn't let the matter rest there; of that, there was not the slightest doubt.

Decario thought about the final battle too, around the monolith. He thought about Tarryn in the grip of a berserker rage, determined to hunt down every last feral ork and slay them. And he thought about Baeloch, struggling in vain to stop him.

Decario had warned him that Tarryn was beyond all reason. He had still been weak from his own attempt to take the shard. He could have done more, all the same. He had even taken a step forwards, intending to intervene physically, but he had felt a heavy, restraining hand on his shoulder. Artekus Bardane hadn't spoken, but the message in his eyes had been perfectly clear.

And what was one more stain on Decario's soul, after all?

'Sir, what about the monolith?' Tarryn's voice brought him back to the present, to the Vault. 'If I may ask?'

'Ought we to destroy it? Perhaps,' Decario mused. 'I would have preferred

to examine it, had there only been more time – for who knows what other secrets it might reveal to us. Perhaps, once the war for Armageddon is over…'

That, he thought, *and the greater war to come, should any of us survive it.*

Tarryn nodded, as if he understood. Maybe, thought Decario, one day he truly would. For now, however, he dismissed the young Relictor, with a promise that his training would begin in earnest tomorrow. Tarryn snapped to attention and saluted before he left. Decario listened to the metallic echoes of his footsteps, as he climbed the steps back to the fortress's main levels.

He was left alone, finally, with his thoughts.

Inevitably, those thoughts drifted back to the Stygies System, a hundred and fifty years ago. Decario was back in the *Captor of Sin*'s engine room, in his Fire Claws colours, with the Excoriator's sword lying next to his outstretched fingers.

Would I have grasped the sword, he wondered, *had I been able to see the future?*

He thought about Inquisitor de Marche. His calming voice had been the lifeline that had guided him back to sanity. He remembered the inquisitor in chains, his head stooped as he was led away to an ignominious death. *Did he know? Had he already seen, on the space hulk, where the path he had chosen to tread must lead?*

Could he have warned me? Would it have changed anything if he had?

He thought about Bardane, and the path along which he had guided him. He thought about the inevitable consequences yet to be faced. He thought about Tarryn, and the path that stretched before him – and even about Baeloch, a sacrifice to the Xanthite cause, and not the first.

The Xanthite cause…

Those were de Marche's words again, he realised.

Decario had never thought of himself as having a *cause.* He had never identified with those shadowy daemon hunters, congregating in their underground temples, cloaked in their dark secrets. He had always simply done what he knew to be right. He had based the choices he had made throughout his life on necessity and unassailable logic, and he wouldn't remake a single one of them now if he could.

He had had the vision again.

It had happened while he had been aboard the Thunderhawk, awaiting the fateful outcome of his Chapter Master's gamble. The bleeding eye had appeared to him more vividly than ever. He had felt as if he could fall into it, and had known that, if he did, he would never be able to climb free. He had clutched at the chest that contained the shard, for strength. *I am doing the best I can*, he had promised. *We shall be ready.*

His choices had been the right ones. Decario was sure of that, more so now than he had ever been. *The Emperor knows I have wished it were not so often enough.* He was following the path that the Emperor had chosen for him.

A century and a half ago, his questing fingers had reached for a fallen weapon.

Had he not taken up the daemon blade then, he would certainly have died.

His brother Fire Claws, however, would doubtless have avenged him, and the tale of that battle would have been a glorious page in their history, not a shameful one. They would not have had their name and colours stripped from them, nor had to endure their banishment from Neutra, the birthplace of their ancestors.

Inquisitor de Marche might have enjoyed a kinder fate, while certainly Artekus Bardane – without a doubt the noblest warrior that Decario had ever had the honour to serve with – would not now stand accused as a heretic.

He couldn't count the number of Space Marines, like Tarryn and Baeloch, who would have served the Emperor faithfully, and never questioned the manner of that service. They wouldn't have risked their souls, and Decario's soul would have remained untarnished too. He would have died without regrets, in blessed ignorance.

And the Holy Imperium of Man would have been doomed.

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DANTE'S CANYON

JOSH REYNOLDS

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07:00:40

FIRST CONTACT, SOUTH-WEST OF DC DRILLING STATION

The combat knife, angled just so, and driven in and upwards by gene-enhanced muscle, pierced the ork's lung smoothly. A wheeze of protest escaped the greenskin before the blade was twisted with deft assurance, puncturing the second lung. Without pause, the blade continued on its journey towards the xenos's foul heart. Orks were dangerous until the last drop of their blood had been spilled, and often for some time afterwards. They fought death as if they had a chance of beating it. It was only when they didn't see it coming that they succumbed without undue protest.

Ariq withdrew his blade and let the ork topple forwards. Snow tumbled from his head and shoulders as he shrugged off the camouflage cloak he'd been hiding under. Even as the ork's body struck the hard packed ice, the White Scars Space Marine Scout was moving forwards through the swirling snow towards the rest of the pack.

There were eight of the filthy beasts, and he intended to collect as many scalps for his lodge pole as he could. Orks were the Emperor's gift to his chosen sons – they existed only to fight and kill and knew neither fear nor sadness, and as such they were the most perfect of prey for the sons of Chogoris.

The orks were festooned with a motley assortment of ramshackle gear – heavy close-combat blades, crude bolter-like weapons and bulky pistols that looked as likely to explode in their wielder's hand as they were to fire. Crude icons decorated their patchwork clothing, and all were dressed somewhat alike in what the xenos considered camouflage. They moved on through the narrow bottleneck in the heart of the canyon, bickering and

snarling at one another, wholly unaware of his approach.

Ariq and the rest of his squad had been waiting for hours, ever since they'd first caught sight of the beasts from their elevated position on the ice-sheathed kilometres-high canyon walls that now loomed above him, casting thick, night-black shadows down across the ice below. They'd descended those walls and prepared an ambush on the ice, trusting in their skills and equipment to hide any sign of their presence from the greenskins. They'd been ordered to use blades alone in dealing with the enemy – sound carried further in the twisting confines of the canyon, even with the muffling effects of the snow. And avalanches were far too common for Ariq's liking. The thought of tonnes of rock and snow plummeting down from above to smash onto the ice was daunting even for a Space Marine. Some things even the Emperor's chosen warriors couldn't fight.

Through the eddy of falling snow, Ariq saw that his attack had as yet gone unnoticed by his victim's companions. He grinned fiercely; it would be a pleasure to rectify that. The orks were scouts, sent ahead of the horde to check the strength of the ice and to find the enemy. That was the only reason they'd be so far ahead of the rest of them, and on foot. Most of the xenos who now infested the southern continent of Armageddon were as mobile as the White Scars, if nowhere near as organised. Hordes of smoke-belching bikes and rattletrap four-wheeled transports thundered across the ice floes, as the orks attacked the water-processing plants and pipelines that snaked across the icy salt-flats to the hives on the mainland.

He sent his knife sailing forwards, to take a second greenskin in the back of the head, drawing his Tulwar as he did so. The curved blade didn't flash as it sprang into his hand, but it made a satisfying sound as it chopped through the bull-neck of an ork, and sent its head bouncing across the ice. 'That's three for me, brothers,' Ariq said, as he finished off the one that was still pawing ineffectually at the tip of his knife, where it protruded from between its piggy eyes.

'*You were always greedy, Ariq. Even as a boy,*' a voice crackled over the vox. Ariq was about to reply, when he heard the telltale hiss of a blade descending. He sank low and pivoted, his foot shooting out to catch the charging ork on its knee. Alien bone crunched, but the greenskin didn't stop. Ariq twisted desperately, hurling himself aside as the crudely forged blade bit deep into the ice. The ork spun with a roar, wrenching its blade

free to launch a second blow at Ariq.

The blow was intercepted by a Tulwar, which removed the ork's sword-hand at the wrist. The brute didn't hesitate, but turned to face its new opponent with a bellicose growl that was cut short as the Tulwar did its work, opening a dark canyon in the ork's twisted features. The beast fell to its knees and then toppled over like a felled tree. Ariq looked up at the other scout and grinned. 'Now who's being greedy, Guyuk?'

'Merely taking my due, brother,' Guyuk said as he helped Ariq to his feet. 'No more, no less.' Like Ariq, he was clean-shaven, and wore his long hair loose. Only when they had become full Space Marines were Scouts of the White Scars allowed to pull their hair into a warrior's topknot. A necklace of ork teeth dangled from Guyuk's neck, testimony to his skill with a blade.

Past Guyuk, Ariq could see that the remaining orks had been engaged by the rest of the squad, including Sergeant Rukn. The beasts roared and snorted as the white-armoured shapes of their attackers sprang in and out of the melee, like steppe wolves bringing down prey. The Scouts, besides Rukn, could not match the xenos for sheer muscle, but working in tandem, with surprise on their side, they were more than a match for the orks. One by one, the remaining beasts were cut down by Tulwar and knife.

'Well done, brothers,' Ariq said cheerfully as he crouched to clean his blades in the snow. 'Eight scalps, and all without having to fire a shot. Truly, we are warriors without equal.'

'Not just greedy,' Guyuk said as he strode past. 'Also stupid.'

'Foolish, rather,' Rukn said as he extracted an ork's tusks from its slack jaw. 'Ariq isn't a complete idiot, after all. If he was, he would be dead by now, the way he fights. He's lucky, which counts for almost as much as skill, in battle.' The sergeant was bare-armed despite the freezing temperatures, and his sinewy arms were maps of scar tissue and old wounds. He wore a warrior's topknot, and had a thick beard, bound into a single plait with intricately carved bone rings. Rukn had more kills than Ariq had years, and his cheeks were heavy with tribal scarring. It was said of Rukn that he had once ridden with the Master of the Hunt, Kor'sarro Khan himself, before requesting to be transferred to the Tenth Company. Why any man would give up riding alongside one of the Chapter's greatest living heroes to spend his days instructing the young and foolish, Ariq could not fathom.

‘Thank you, Sergeant. I shall make a note of your kindness in my next poem,’ Ariq said. All recruits of the White Scars Tenth *Minghan* were expected to master many skills, including more delicate arts such as calligraphy. ‘The pen and the sword in mutual accord,’ as the Khan-of-Khans had once said. Ariq had already completed two hundred and fifty six stanzas of his ode to the destruction of the Khwarzm and their hill-forts by the Khan-of-Khans during the wars of conquest, and he looked forward to adding another two hundred, at the first opportunity.

‘I’ve read your poetry, boy. That’s an insult if I’ve ever heard one,’ Rukn grunted. He held up a bloody tooth and examined it for a moment before secreting it away in his armour. The sergeant collected ork teeth and carved them into Go pieces. It was considered a high honour among those whom he’d trained to be gifted a full set of playing pieces upon their promotion to fully fledged Space Marine. ‘We need to hide these bodies. No sense in alerting our prey before we’re ready. Sartaq, Yunan, give me a hand. We’ll crack the ice and drop them in.’

The last two members of the squad hurried forward.

Yunan, the youngest of them all, hefted a hand flamer as he sank to his haunches. As he began to melt a hole in the ice, he asked, ‘Which ones are they?’

Ariq turned one of the bodies over with his foot. ‘Does it matter?’

Yunan shrugged. ‘It’s a courtesy to know the tribe of the warrior you kill,’ he said as the ice at his feet began to turn to steam.

‘I don’t think orks have a concept of courtesy,’ Sartaq said. He hefted a body onto his shoulder as he kicked a decapitated head towards the pit Yunan was burning. Sartaq was a stolid, practical sort, and was built squat where his brothers were lean. Sartaq’s folk had been farmers or masons of some sort, Ariq thought. He rarely spoke of them. He rarely spoke at all, really. For the first six months that they’d fought beside each other Ariq had assumed the other Scout was mute.

‘But we do,’ Yunan said serenely as he turned off the hand flamer and stood. ‘The form of the thing is as much the thing itself.’

‘Between your poetry and his philosophy, this is going to be a long campaign,’ Guyuk said, looking at Ariq.

Rukn smacked him with an open palm on the back of the head. He had cut the glyph plate loose from a dead xenos’s harness and he bounced it on his

palm as he spoke. ‘Quiet. Yunan is correct. The orks are beasts, but do we not honour the memory of a beast, if it is worthy? They are worthy prey, and will be treated with courtesy. Now dump their carcasses in the hole so we can do what we came out here to do.’

‘I thought we came out here to kill orks,’ Guyuk said, sheathing his Tulwar with a flourish. Guyuk was right, though Ariq would never say as much. Armageddon seethed with the fires of war, even here in the frozen reaches of the Deadlands. The great hives shuddered beneath the incessant hammer-blows of ork artillery as the greenskins spread across the planet. More than twenty Space Marine Chapters had responded to the invasion, including the White Scars, who, as was their right, had decided to trust in their own well-honed strategies rather than subordinate themselves to the monolithic joint effort in the making. ‘Though why we had to do it in the cold, only the Khan knows,’ Guyuk continued.

Rukn smacked him again. ‘Show respect for Suboden Khan, boy. It is his hand that wields the Tulwar Brotherhood, of which we are the sharp tip. And we came out here because it is better to ride free in the cold than to be trapped behind warm walls, as the Black Templars and the Salamanders choose to do.’ He looked at them all, holding their eyes one by one. ‘Never forget that. The Palatine huddled behind walls, and trusted in armour and stone, and the Khan-of-Khans threw down their fortresses one by one, even as he did to the Khwarzm and the Yukat. Better to ride with death at your side than to wait for it to come to you. As the Khan himself said, quickness is the essence of victory.’ He gestured dismissively. ‘Now, finish setting the charges, while I relay our coordinates.’

Ariq grinned and went back to where he’d been hiding when the orks had arrived. He rooted through the snow and found the reinforced satchel containing the plasma detonators. He tossed one to Guyuk, and a second to Sartaq. ‘Pace them out. We’ve only got a few left.’

The Khan had ordered that the shimmering path of ice that wound through the guts of the canyon be booby-trapped at intervals – every few kilometres they had planted explosives at varying heights along the walls of the canyon. The devices were positioned so that when they went off, the explosion would shave thick layers of rock off the face of the cliff and send it plummeting down into the ice below, shattering it and dumping anyone who survived the resulting avalanche into the freezing waters, to drown or

succumb to the cold. Dead was dead, and the White Scars weren't overly concerned about how the enemy got that way.

Ariq and Guyuk climbed up one side of the cliff while Sartaq managed the other. It took them no small effort to do so. While they were stronger than any normal human, the Scouts did not yet possess the enhanced musculature of a fully fledged Space Marine. Ariq thrilled in the effort it took to scale the frost-encrusted cliff-face, as he couldn't help but thrill every time he utilised the strength with which he had been gifted. He could barely recall his time as a mortal now, short as it had been; human memory had been replaced by the war-rites of the gods of storm and wind, so that he might learn to kill with joy and pride.

When he reached the right spot, he held on with one hand and used the other to heft the explosive. He thumbed the activator switch for the anchor-rod, and a metallic spike shot out of the bottom of the device. He sank the spike into the rock with a muttered prayer to whatever sliver of a machine-spirit the explosive might possess. The activation light switched from green to red and he grunted in satisfaction. The explosives were set to go off many hours from now, when they would hopefully do the most damage to the great mass of orks even now squirming into the crooked confines of the canyon.

He paused, and looked out over the panorama of the canyon. Even from his current height, he could see just a minute section of it. The whole thing was only visible in its entirety from low orbit. The bone-numbing wind that crawled through the contours of the canyon brought with it a wash of freezing air that sought to steal his breath from his lungs, and he rocked slightly on his perch. It reminded him somewhat of the Khum Kharta Mountains, on Chogoris, though the Deadlands were, if anything, even more inhospitable.

And they were about to become more so, if the plumes of smoke he'd spotted piercing the snow to rise above the canyon were any indication. Orks, and more than eight. Ariq descended quickly. Even as he reached the ground, he saw that Guyuk had seen what he'd seen and was already telling Rukn. The sergeant waved his comrade to silence as he crouched over the portable vox-unit.

'I repeat – we've encountered scouts – glyph-markings indicate they belong to one of the mechanised groups. They were on foot, but that doesn't

mean much. The greenskins have learned better than to assume the ice is of uniform thickness everywhere, more is the pity. It looks like the rest of them are on the way. We await further orders,' Rukn said, into the vox. The vox hissed and spat. The inclement weather interfered with the signal at the best of times. 'Say again,' Rukn said.

'*…pull them in… trap…*'

Rukn grunted. He peered across the ice, towards the distant mouth of the canyon. Then he smiled crookedly and waved a hand in the direction from which the orks had come. 'Let's go wave a bit of raw meat in front of the beast's nose, hey?'

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07:01:60

DC DRILLING STATION, GRID REF. G6

The drilling station spoke, if one but had the wit to listen. Although that was true of anything, Kanim thought. It whispered in a language of creaking, weather-scarred metal, vibrating plasteel anchor-lines and the ever-shifting ice. It spoke of glacial tides, and oceans of ice that moved bare metres over the course of centuries. It spoke of ancient industrial structures, built in better millennia, and kept standing by daily sacrifices of blood and ingenuity from those who laboured within them.

The ice field far below him was too thin to support the full weight of the drilling station. Thus, it fell to the vast webs of plasteel cables that stretched from each level of the station and several ancient, humming suspensor fields to keep it from toppling into the ice and sinking into the cold dark beneath.

He stood on the upper platform, watching the workers scurry below, hard at their tasks. Like all Space Marines, Kanim was built for battle and armoured in the Emperor's grace. But he was no mere battle-brother – the cerulean pauldron and vambrace of his right arm and the shimmering crystalline force hood that hung over his helmeted head, as well as the ornate and highly stylised force staff he clutched loosely in his right hand, proclaimed him a Stormseer – a Librarian of the White Scars Chapter, a *zadyin arga*, a master of lightning and the spirits of prophecy and storm. His armour was covered in line upon line of delicate Khorchin characters, so many, in fact, that the white parts were almost grey, and on his belt hung the tanned scalps of orks, upon which yet more such characters had been painstakingly inked. A Tulwar hung from his hip, its sheath decorated with

ork tusks and dried ears.

Beneath him, massive pistons groaned and vents expelled great clouds of steam as the immense melta-drills sank down into the white expanse of the ice, chewing it to a fine sludge in the process of seeking out the natural oil deposits far below. When found, the oil was then extracted by the much-patched and well-tended suction hoses. The hoses, blessed and kept whole against the touch of sharp metal, flying ice shards and pressure build-up by the attentions of the representatives of the Mechanicum who were assigned to the station, drew the oil into the massive boilers that composed the bulk of the station. From there it was heated and churned and purified, before being expelled into the vast labyrinth of pipelines that would carry it to the distant hives on the southern edge of the planet's main continental landmass, where the great bulk of the planet's population lived, worked and died.

Even with the planet invaded by orks, and their lives under threat, the station crew worked. Kanim could not say that he admired them, but he thought, perhaps, that he understood their dedication. The people of Armageddon had been hammered into shapes fit for purpose, in both body and mind, even as Kanim had been, and they would fulfil that purpose, though the sky should crack and the world crumble.

The Imperium was a vast mechanism of meat and metal, with a single function – the preservation of humanity in a hostile universe; neither war nor cataclysm could be allowed to halt even the most minor of its operations, lest the whole system suffer. Only the dead were spared from unending toil, whether on isolated drilling stations, or facing the Emperor's enemies on the battlefield. Kanim drew strength from that purpose, as he supposed that those working below did. Purpose was the rock that anchored the souls of men.

Still watching the workers, he placed an azure gauntlet against a support strut, and felt the voice of the ice echo up through the humming metal. The Deadlands, like the vast, rolling steppes of his home world of Chogoris, had their own peculiar rhythm. He closed his eyes, and let it wash over his mind and soul. The weather here tasted differently to the sudden, violent storms of home. Here, there was no lightning, no rain, merely the inexorable shifting of the ice, and the drifting snow. It had a predator's calm – deceptive and lethal – but it could be controlled, if only just. Frost began to

collect on his fingers and creep up his arm as he pulled the cold from the strut and into himself. He pulled his hand away, and examined it. Ice crystals cracked and drifted from his fingers as he made a fist, and then dispersed the cold back into the air.

'Bored, shaman?'

'No, my Khan,' Kanim said, turning to look at the Space Marine who'd joined him on the platform. 'Merely attuning my spirit to that of this place. The cold will be as useful a weapon as any Tulwar or bolter, come the arrival of our prey.'

Suboden Khan grunted, but said nothing. The Khan of the White Scars Tulwar Brotherhood was clad in power armour the colour of the snow that even now drifted down on the platform, and he held his helmet under one arm. The high gorget of his chest-plate had been pierced in places, and a number of simple bone and bronze amulets had been threaded through the holes. Each amulet was inscribed with a single symbol, among them a tortoise, an eagle, and a wolf, and Suboden touched them every so often, as if to reassure himself.

'And what do the spirits say?' he asked. There was no mockery in his voice, merely an innocent enquiry that was at odds with the grim set of his features. Suboden rarely acted without the advice of the spirits, and was assiduous about consulting divinations and oracles. If none of that was forthcoming, he invariably played the turtle, hunkering down and outlasting the foe with a tenacity that would have made even the sons of Dorn take note.

'That the enemy is coming. The ice squirms beneath his tread, and the air is befouled by his exhaust,' Kanim said.

'Good,' Suboden said, something like relief in his voice. He tilted his brutal, blunt features up and opened his mouth to catch a falling flake of snow. His hair was unbound, and it whipped about his face in the wind that moaned across the platform. He made a face and spat. 'Even the snow tastes foul,' he said.

'The atmosphere was likely poisoned during the orks' first attempt to take the planet fifty-seven years ago,' Kanim said.

'It's not that, and you know it,' Suboden said. 'What did you yourself say, the moment we set foot on this world?' He smiled. 'Oh, yes, "cursed" was the word you used, if I recall correctly.'

‘Your memory is, as ever, a thing to be envied, my Khan.’ Kanim managed to keep a straight face, but only just. It was the privilege of a Stormseer to behave so. If a Khan were too serious, his Stormseer must be laughter made flesh. If he were too jocular, his Stormseer must be grave and dignified. Only thus could the balance be maintained.

Suboden snorted. He glanced down at the toiling workers. There was no admiration in that gaze, Kanim noted. Merely… calculation. Suboden had the soul of a craftsman, rather than a poet. In another life, he would have been a blacksmith, Kanim thought, or perhaps a carpenter. ‘They are calmer than I expected.’

‘They feel safe with us here.’

Suboden snorted again, with less amusement this time. ‘They should not.’ He paused and then said, ‘We received a vox from Rukn and his scouts.’ Kanim said nothing, but merely waited for Suboden to continue. ‘The orks have entered the canyon, as I predicted.’ There was no pride in his voice, Kanim noted, merely satisfaction.

‘Numbers?’

‘Many,’ Suboden said. ‘But then, we knew that.’ He smacked a support strut with his fist. ‘This ground is not ideal for what must be done, but we must make do.’

‘It’s not too late to evacuate. We can be gone before they arrive,’ Kanim said.

Suboden looked at him. ‘Are you actually suggesting that we run, or is this another example of what you claim is humour?’

‘I suggest nothing. I merely point out that the future is a tree with many branches. The one you choose to climb is entirely up to you.’

‘That is… singularly unhelpful,’ Suboden said.

‘Yes, I am afraid it is. Are they the same ones? The orks, I mean.’

‘Rukn was not specific,’ Suboden said. ‘But it’s them. I feel it in my bones. Our quarry is within our grasp, shaman. They have led us a merry chase, but the time for games is done. There is a war to be fought, and we have wasted too many days at play with these greenskins.’ Suboden stretched, like a great cat awakening from slumber. ‘The Khan himself might have said that the wise warrior avoids open battle, but I grow tired of being wise.’

Kanim said nothing. He too felt the impatience of a hunter long denied his

prey. He had no doubt that every warrior of the Tulwar Brotherhood felt the same way. It wasn't often that their chosen quarry escaped the White Scars, yet the White Lightning orks had managed it not once but several times, over the preceding weeks. Doing so had earned them the attention of Suboden himself, and he had brought Kanim and the rest of the Brotherhood into the icy wastes to bring them to heel at last.

Other Space Marine Chapters, Kanim knew, would have put little stock in identifying and destroying the particular xenos sub-group in question. But for the White Scars it was a matter of pride to know the name of their prey, especially when it came to the *hain*, as the orks were called in Khorchin. The ork was nature's perfect prey, and the perfect opponent of the Space Marine. The greenskins were strong, and certain in their destructive convictions. They did not hesitate, for war was their overriding instinct. But they were not mindless, like the devouring bio-swarms of the tyranids, or eager to muddy the clear waters of conflict with needless words like the tau.

No, they were pure things, the orks. They waged war in a magnificent, beautiful way, and to match blades with them was akin to stepping into a fire to be purged clean of all impurities. It was a welcome relief from lesser conflicts. He sighed in satisfaction at the thought. 'They have taken the bait, then.'

'So it seems,' Suboden said. 'And if not, Rukn will see that they do.'

'You don't sound pleased.'

'It is not that. I merely find the prospect of having to explain myself to our hosts tedious,' Suboden said. Kanim chuckled.

'That's one word for it. I will go and tell them, if you wish,' Kanim said.

'What I wish is for you to stand with me when I face them and explain what must happen. I will need the calm your presence brings, I think,' Suboden said. He frowned. 'I grow frustrated with their petty complaints.'

'We all have our tasks, my Khan. They see no reason that ours should take precedence over theirs,' Kanim said.

'Will they still feel the same when the greenskins come baying for their scalps?'

'Likely not. But, then, that is their prerogative. They are not soldiers, and know little of war,' Kanim said. He looked back down at the workers, and felt a moment of pity. 'Do not begrudge them that innocence, my Khan.'

'I begrudge them nothing save my time,' Suboden said. He let out a breath.

‘I wish that the spirits were more clear, shaman. I do not know if I follow the correct course.’

‘Whatever course we are on is the correct course, my Khan.’ Kanim tapped the ground with his staff.

‘And what if we are wrong?’ Suboden persisted.

‘Luck counts for as much as skill in battle. A wise man said that,’ Kanim said.

‘That sounds like something Rukn might say,’ Suboden said. He looked down. ‘I still have that set of Go pieces he made me.’

‘They are very fine game pieces,’ Kanim said. He looked at Suboden. ‘A thousand battles are waged in the wise man’s head to gain but a single victory, as Honoured Kyublai said.’

Suboden made an impatient gesture. ‘Spare me your philosophy, Kanim.’ He looked out over the canyon and tugged on his beard. ‘Tell me again what they said about our prey. Tell me what the spirits whispered to you.’

Kanim followed his Khan’s gaze and cleared his throat. ‘He is destruction made flesh. While the world burns, he rides its rim and gathers those among the *hain* who know the value of speed. They join him, and their numbers swell. Soon, they will be as a wave that drowns the armies of man in metal and fire.’ He looked at Suboden. ‘There are many such beasts loose on Armageddon, my Khan. But this one is ours, and there is a debt of blood between us, and the spirits whisper that if you continue to follow this course then that debt shall be paid.’

‘By whom, I wonder,’ Suboden murmured. Kanim had wondered that himself. What was the story that would be born in this place? What campfire tale would the ordu take from this engagement? Would it be the story of a great victory, or of a hunt gone wrong? He knew that it weighed heavily on Suboden. Would he be a hero of the Chapter, or a warning to future Khans?

‘Do you doubt us, my Khan?’ he asked finally.

‘I doubt myself, Stormseer.’ Suboden said it plainly, without hesitation.

Kanim nodded, pleased. Suboden, unlike many, knew his limitations. Then he said, ‘I think it was the Khan who said that doubt is the stone on which the blade of victory is sharpened.’

Suboden grunted. After a moment, he asked, ‘You just made that up, didn’t you?’

‘I cannot tell a lie,’ Kanim said.

They stood in silence for long minutes. Suboden glanced at him. ‘I notice that you haven’t answered my question.’

‘Haven’t I?’ Kanim asked, portentously.

Something that might have been a smile twitched across Suboden’s lips. Before he could reply, he heard a clang of metal, signalling the arrival of a lift onto the platform. He turned, and cursed softly.

Kanim looked past his Khan and saw a bustling flock of civilian administrators making their way carefully across the platform. Industrial facilities such as the drilling platform relied on three separate groups to maintain its functions – the Administratum, the Mechanicum and the workers. Larger facilities often had equal numbers of all three groups, as well as impressively byzantine systems of bureaucratic alliances and internecine grudges stretching back decades, through generations of workers. Luckily, the Dante’s Canyon facility, despite being among the oldest of the Deadlands drilling platforms, was also one of the smallest, both in terms of size and staff – there were only a few hundred of the latter. Thanks to both, it was one of the most efficiently run.

‘My lord, my lord,’ the highest-ranking Administratum adept, a lean, sallow-faced man named Lyr, called out. He stumbled on the uneven platform, but was steadied by the mechadendrite of his opposite number among the tech-priests, something that called itself Magos Pitel. Kanim wasn’t sure whether it was male or female, not that it mattered. Lyr patted the magos’s shoulder in a gesture of thanks and said, ‘My lord, I really must register a complaint, pursuant to section twenty-five-slash-thirteen, sub-section alpha-octavian, relating specifically to inter-force behaviour!’

Suboden glanced at Kanim, who murmured, ‘You ordered Khajog to clear the crew barracks, remember?’ Suboden closed his eyes and grunted.

‘He’s upset them, I’d guess,’ Kanim went on serenely. ‘But then, you knew that would happen, didn’t you?’

‘I suspected,’ Suboden murmured. ‘I was hoping he might surprise me.’ He twitched his head and moved to meet the civilian representatives. ‘What is wrong, Adept Lyr?’

‘Your man started a riot, that’s what’s wrong,’ barked the representative of the platform’s workforce, a tall and broad-shouldered woman with close-cropped white hair, named Mykel. She was either very brave, Kanim

thought, or very angry, to address one of the Emperor's own in such a bellicose fashion. Perhaps she had met Space Marines before. He wondered if she had been impressed then; he suspected not. The workers saw to the day-to-day running of the drilling station. While most such stations were run by servitors, some had always had a human workforce doing the dirty, dangerous jobs that the Mechanicum didn't want to do and the Administratum couldn't. They often paid for such diligence with their lives and health, but they were as dedicated in their way as any Space Marine.

Suboden met her fire with ice, and she swallowed her next words. A moment later, she continued, more moderately, 'There are families in there. He tried to herd them like bovids out of their homes. We are people, not beasts to be sent fleeing with harsh words and glares.'

'They are being readied for evacuation,' Suboden said. 'They knew this. You knew this.'

She was about to reply when Lyr waved her to silence brusquely. 'My lord, I'm afraid that your man turned an already tense situation into a full-blown emergency. The crew members in Barracks A-17 have begun barricading themselves in, and they've turned their ire on your men. Violence is, I fear, imminent,' Lyr said quickly.

'Statistical likelihood of conflict, eighty-seven percent,' Pitel rasped.

Suboden strode past them without a word. Kanim followed. So quickly did they move, that they left the administrators gaping in their wake. Kanim understood the reason for Suboden's alacrity – if the crew attacked, Khajog would slaughter them. And if that happened, they might well face a war on two fronts. Such unfortunate incidents had happened before, and while the White Scars felt no particular affection for the crew of the drilling platform, they were nonetheless under their protection. It would be a blemish on the otherwise pristine record of the Tulwar Brotherhood, and one that Suboden would be forced to answer for when they returned to Chogoris.

'Khajog,' Suboden said, when they were safely out of earshot. Kanim was quietly impressed at the wealth of emotion which his Khan packed into that single utterance. Frustration, anger, resignation, all were in evidence and all were, Kanim thought, sadly well-deserved. Khajog was a warrior without parallel, even amongst the Tulwar Brotherhood. But like the *berkut*, the hunting eagle of the steppes, he had no room in his head or heart for anything other than the song of blades and the taste of blood. For that

reason he had been named champion of the company, after his single-minded demolition of a number of others in the contest of blades. Among the White Scars it was thought best that such warriors were placed where they might satiate their desire for battle, rather than become truculent for want of it.

Kanim inclined his head as they walked. ‘He is wild at heart. There is much of the storm in him,’ he said. He gestured for emphasis, whipping a finger through the air as if it were a lightning bolt, and Suboden snorted.

‘If that is your way of saying that he is a perennial annoyance, then I am forced to agree,’ he said. He shook his head. ‘I had such high hopes for him.’

‘The spirits still do,’ Kanim said. And they did. Khajog’s name came up every time he tossed the bones. He was wrapped in chains of destiny, meant for something at once greater and more tragic than service as Suboden’s champion. Kanim had not seen what it was, nor did he truly wish to. Khajog’s fate was his alone; it was simply Kanim’s task to see that he was ready for it, when the time came, just as it was his task to see that Suboden took the head of his enemy. He was but a guide, travelling many roads all at once.

‘Have the spirits met him?’ Suboden demanded.

Kanim grinned. ‘He’s not that bad. Vicious, stubborn, thoughtless, arrogant, yes… but he is a great warrior, in his way.’

‘Yes, in his way, which is not our way,’ Suboden said.

‘All ways are our way,’ Kanim said. ‘We move when we wish, and stand when we must.’ His grin faded. ‘Khajog knows the value of moving, but not yet how to stand.’

Suboden looked at him suspiciously. ‘Is that what the spirits say?’

‘That is what I say,’ Kanim said. He smiled widely. ‘If you were asking my advice, which you weren’t, of course.’ He looked up at the ceiling of the corridor, as if seeking help from the spirits. ‘You never do. Which is a shame, because I am a wellspring of guidance.’

‘You are a wellspring of something, I agree,’ Suboden said.

Kanim laughed.

Khajog, champion of the Tulwar Brotherhood, was growing angry. The bottle that bounced off his shoulder-plate had done no harm, save to splatter

the dregs of its contents across the heraldry painted there, but such disrespect could not be borne.

He was clad in one of the Chapter's greatest treasures – a Mark III suit of power armour, which had waded through the fires of war at Terra itself, according to the artificer-scribes of the Chapter's armoury. It bore a proud litany of honour that was greater even than his own, and its spirit hungered for glory and battle with a savagery that made his own desires seem as things of milk and eggshell. The skull of its first wearer had been sealed in blessed silver and set into the chest-plate so that he, whoever he had been, might meet the Chapter's enemies in battle head on for evermore, and the heavy helm, with its horse-tail crest, hung from his hip. He reached up and swiped the droplets of foul liquor from the armour's surface and snarled, 'Form up!'

The squad of Space Marines standing behind him hesitated. Khajog glanced at the sergeant, Selim, who nodded and said, 'You heard him, brothers. Form up.' Khajog turned back round, satisfied. Selim never hesitated to give him the honour he was due, though he outranked the champion.

Selim and his men fanned out around Khajog, waiting for his command as the crowd of frightened and angry workers surged around them. Selim knocked on his chest-plate where the delicate characters of a poem from Terran antiquity had been carved. 'The dogs bite their betters, Khajog. Let us show them what such disrespect earns them, hey?' he asked. Khajog grunted. A sea of fearful faces surrounded him, and the air stank of growing panic. It was infuriating, and he longed for something to vent his annoyance on.

His fingers clutched at empty air as he forced himself to remain calm. He stroked his chin and scarred cheeks irritably, as his other hand played with the hilt of his Tulwar. He had carved the hilt of the sword himself, from the femur of a Barghesi he had killed in personal combat. He smiled slightly, as he thought of it. That had been a good day.

Another bottle shattered at his feet, and his moment of good humour evaporated as if it had never been. He had been ordered to see to the evacuation of all non-essential personnel. The crew quarters, which were set on the high platforms, had, over the centuries since the station had begun operations, become something akin to a small town. There were families in

the quarters who had occupied the same billet for three generations. That he had not foreseen their resistance to being moved only added to his growing anger. He had not bothered to explain himself before he began turning the inhabitants out of the quarters, and the awestruck stares and whispered prayers to the Emperor had first become murmurs of discontent, and then erupted into outright anger.

He had been foolish, and now he was paying the price. It had been an easily avoidable mistake, at least in retrospect. Kanim would have known just what to say to lighten the moment and put the humans at their ease. Why the Stormseer hadn't been sent to do this, Khajog could only guess. 'Perhaps the spirits had it in for me,' he said to no one in particular.

As the crowd grew, and more bottles filled the air, one of the other White Scars, Hulku, muttered, 'I'm beginning to be reminded of that time I stuck my finger into an ant mound.'

'You give them too much credit, brother. Ants are more dangerous than this lot,' Selim said. 'Still, best not to let them get ideas.' He looked at Khajog.

Khajog let out a grunt of bitter amusement. Selim was right; the crowd's anger was palpable, and it was feeding their fear. He needed to act decisively, before the situation spiralled completely out of control.

For a moment, he considered ordering his brother White Scars to open fire. The rest of the miners would fall into line, he suspected, if he showed them what awaited them should they continue to prove troublesome. He restrained himself, however. Suboden had ordered him to see that no harm came to these obtuse wretches, and he was determined to fulfil that command. But a lesson had to be taught.

He waved for his men to lower their bolters and stepped forward, thrusting his way into the crowd easily. Quicker than the human eye could follow, his hand snapped out to grab hold of the man who had thrown the bottle. Khajog had identified him even as the bottle left his hand. He snatched the man up and swept an arm out, almost gently, to clear a path out of the crowd. People fell, scrambling out of his path as he stomped back to the other White Scars.

'Worthless,' Khajog growled, hefting the crewman by the collar of his environment suit so that all might see him. 'You attack us, when we lower ourselves to help you? What have you ever accomplished, that you would

think that wise?’ The Space Marine cast a baleful eye about him, raking the gathered workers with his gaze. He reached up and caught the struggling man’s jaw in a gentle grip. A shattered jaw would provide a pertinent example, he thought. The man could always get a new one. ‘I shall teach you not to hurl insults at your betters, I think,’ Khajog said loudly.

‘If you do, I shall take the hand that deals the blow, as payment for your arrogance, brother,’ Suboden said icily as he thrust his bulk through the crowd. The crew scattered. Khajog’s warriors sank down, heads bowed, as Suboden strode forward, his face clouded with barely restrained rage. ‘Put him down,’ he snapped.

Khajog dropped the man, who rolled to his feet and scrambled away with a whimper. ‘My Khan, I–’ he began, but Suboden cut him off with a gesture. Khajog fell silent.

‘These people are not yours to teach, brother. They are not yours to harm, or to hinder in their duties. Like this place, they belong to the Emperor alone. You will defend them as you would defend anything claimed by Him,’ Suboden said, drilling the air between them with his words.

‘They attacked me,’ Khajog said. Despite his best efforts to hide it, his voice was thick with sullen resentment. He silently cursed himself for showing such weakness before the Khan. What sort of champion whined so?

‘Do you blame them? Do you blame the hound for snapping at the hand that it fears might strike it?’ Suboden demanded. ‘Are we Flesh Tearers then, to strike in a moment of rage? Or Iron Hands, to crush without care? We are the Emperor’s hunting-eagles, boy, and eagles do not concern themselves with mice.’

‘Save when they do, of course,’ Kanim said, smiling slightly. ‘Then, the ways of eagles are not the ways of men.’ Khajog glared at the Stormseer. He wasn’t sure whether the other White Scar was trying to help him, or was merely indulging what passed for his sense of humour.

‘Save when they are,’ Suboden said. He stared at Khajog, and then looked around at the still-kneeling Space Marines. ‘None of you spoke against this foolishness?’

‘They had no chance to do so,’ Khajog said quickly. ‘If there is to be a punishment, let it be mine alone, my Khan.’ He looked defiantly at Suboden. ‘I merely sought to follow your orders.’

‘As they followed yours,’ Suboden said, ‘though they had no reason to do so. You were not their commander.’ He cast his disappointed gaze over each of the gathered Space Marines in turn. Neither Selim nor Hulku nor any of the others met his gaze.

Kanim thumped the ground with his staff. ‘Such dedication has its place, my Khan,’ he said. ‘Remember the wisdom of Qin Xa, who said, “Look on your warriors as your own beloved brothers”.’ Granted, Khajog isn’t the loveable sort, but one must make allowances.’

Suboden grunted and shook his head. ‘Come,’ he said. ‘We must hold council. Our prey has arrived, and it is time to ready our trap.’ He strode towards the exit. Khajog made to follow, but hesitated and looked at Kanim.

‘I am not certain as to whether or not I owe you thanks, Stormseer,’ he said.

‘I merely do as the spirits advise, champion,’ Kanim said, smiling slightly.

Khajog shook his head and followed Suboden, leaving the Stormseer staring after him.

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07:04:00

SECOND CONTACT, WEST OF DC DRILLING STATION

‘Do you think that they’re out there?’ Ariq murmured, peering out across the shimmering, frozen landscape. A haze of ice-particles clung to everything, a result of the freezing precipitation that had only just ceased, and it was hard to see anything through the thick haze now rising from the ice. That all-encompassing haze was why he and Guyuk had climbed down from the canyon walls at Rukn’s behest, to see what could be seen, and if what they saw was orks, to lead them into the guns of Rukn and the others.

‘Only one way to find out,’ Guyuk muttered. ‘Go look.’

‘You go look. I’ll cover you.’

‘Turning coward in your old age, brother?’

‘Caution isn’t cowardice,’ Ariq said. ‘Besides, I was merely thinking of you, Guyuk, my old friend. You’re right, I was greedy earlier. It’s your turn to go hunting orks.’

Guyuk stared at him steadily for several long moments. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You run faster than me.’ This was true, though Ariq was surprised to hear Guyuk admit it. And this moment was all about speed. Nonetheless, Ariq hesitated. Guyuk looked at him. ‘You’re also the lucky one, remember?’

‘That’s debatable,’ Ariq said. ‘But fine, I’m going.’ Then he was slithering forward across the ice, his form hidden beneath the folds of his camouflage cloak.

The ice quivered beneath him, and periodically, chunks of ice and rock tumbled down from above, shaken loose by the vibrations that preceded the greenskin advance. He froze in place as a jagged spar of rock struck the ice and punctured it in a gout of water. Cracks sped across the rest of the ice

faster than he could predict and he tensed, ready to spring to his feet and run. The danger passed as quickly as it had appeared, however, as the broken skin of the ice refroze within moments of cracking. He let out a shaky breath and rose carefully to his feet. Crouching, he placed the flat of his hand against the ice, and tried to understand what it was telling him.

One of the first lessons Rukn had instilled in them was that every environment had its own voice, and to disregard that voice was to court disaster. To wage war properly, one had to know the limits imposed not just by the enemy, but by the field of battle itself.

As he felt the shiver of the ice beneath his flesh, he realised that something was wrong. The vibration was off, somehow. Orks, or at least those they'd encountered thus far, normally travelled in big bulky, rattletrap carriers on half-tracks or mismatched wheels, or else they rode soot-belching bikes that juddered fiercely, as if they might fly apart at any moment. Such vehicles were almost a hindrance on the ice. Between their weight and their erratic suspension, the ice often shattered beneath them, carrying them and their crews and passengers down into the dark and cold. Out on the open floes, he had seen hundreds, if not thousands, of the greenskins die that way.

The wind shifted, slightly. He lifted his boltgun, suddenly aware of a dull noise impinging upon his consciousness. It wasn't the normal background noise of crashing floes and grinding ice. No, this was the sound of engines. 'They're here,' he murmured into the vox. 'Orders?'

'*…et them see… ou… draw them into the trap, brother.*' Rukn's words pierced the omnipresent crackle of distortion, and Ariq closed his eyes in consternation. Rukn's speech about them being the tip of the blade wasn't simply poetic licence; the tip had many uses, one of which was to guide the enemy's strike to where you wanted it to go.

That was their task now. The trap had been prepared, and all that remained was to tempt the beast to enter. Easy enough, unless you were the bait. 'Did you catch that, Guyuk?' he asked, after a moment.

'*Yes.*'

Ariq smirked. Guyuk sounded less than pleased, but then he would be the one responsible for providing covering fire. Not a good place to be, when the enemy moved as fast as these particular orks were inclined to do.

This was their test. They all knew it, for Rukn had made no secret of the fact. This was the final proving ground for him and Guyuk and the others.

Some of them would not survive it; that was their lot, after all. The day he had been chosen by the zadyin arga, selected to join the Star Hunt, he had known that death was all that they promised. A good death, but still a death.

Ariq did not want to die. He was not a coward, despite Guyuk's words. He did not fear death, but neither did he feel inclined to race towards it, arms wide. Death was not a lover to be embraced, but a winged shadow racing across the steppe, always just behind him. He smiled. Let it fly as swiftly as it might; it would find him fast prey indeed. *Lucky Ariq, that's who I am*, he thought. It was the mantra he lived by, though he would never say so. Skill, prowess, philosophical reasoning, these were the proper tools of a White Scar. But luck, luck had many friends and no favourites.

The air was torn by the arrhythmic growl of an alien engine as a shape pierced the haze rising off the ice. The odd contours of the canyon walls had muffled the sounds until the last moment, and now the roar of the approaching ork bike struck him like a physical blow, plucking him from his reverie. The bike was an unsophisticated thing, rusting metal shrouded in clouds of greasy smoke, with heavy guns lashed to either side as ballast, but rather than wheels, it was mounted on rough skis and driven forwards by an overcharged rocket engine. Ariq was so taken aback that he wasted precious seconds trying to process the sheer moronic genius of the enemy. The orks had obviously learned from previous failures.

The ork hurtled towards him, bouncing up and down on its seat. It saw him at the last moment and yanked a wide, jagged blade from a sheath mounted on the side of its bike. It swiped wildly at him as it passed by. The blow came so close to him that he could hear it cut the air. He swayed aside, and the world seemed to slow around him. His ears were full of the dull rumble of the bike's engine, and his eyes stung with the spray of slush thrown up by the ski it was mounted on. He could smell the raw stink of its exhaust, mingled with the foul odour of its rider. He could hear the damp snap of the ork's vibrant topknot, and the strident bellows tearing their way from between its jaws.

He lifted and fired his bolter almost lazily. The front of the bike's chassis exploded. Time sped up once more as the vehicle flipped end over end through the air, before crashing down onto the ice, leaving only a greasy contrail of smoke to mark its path. The ork slid away from the wreck and rolled to a stop some distance away. As Ariq started towards it, the ork

heaved itself to its feet. It saw him coming, and its eyes bulged with rage. It loped towards its fallen bike and tore a broken strut free of the tangled mass of wreckage.

As it spun to face him, its makeshift weapon in hand, he fired. The bolter kicked in his grip as dark wounds opened up on the beast's body. It refused to fall, however, and lunged to meet him, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. The strut smashed the bolter out of his hands, sending it sliding across the ice. Ariq drew his knife from its sheath and laid open the ork's throat as it staggered past him.

It wheezed and swayed on its feet, and for a moment he was certain that it would fall. Then it whirled with a gurgle and nearly took his head off with its makeshift weapon. He slid back and reached for his Tulwar. The ork threw itself at him. The strut fell towards his skull with a whistle and he caught the blow on his knife. He drew his Tulwar and opened the ork's midsection in the same smooth motion. It staggered, blood spewing from its mouth. It glared at him for a moment, and then a strange expression crossed its brute features. Ariq realised that it was smiling as it launched itself at him again.

He spun gracefully, meeting its charge with his knife, his Tulwar removing the hand that clutched the strut. The beast's bulk sagged against him, and it gave something that might have been a disappointed sigh as his knife sought and found its heart. Ariq shoved the carcass away. 'That's four for me, Guyuk,' he said, wiping the blood from his Tulwar and sheathing it. Ariq seized his bolter from where it had fallen and looked up at the dark sky. He fancied he saw something swoop away, and said, 'Fly faster next time, friend Death.'

Even as he spoke, the ice shifted beneath his feet. He looked up, frowning. 'I didn't mean that literally,' he spat. More ork bikes, much like the first in general shape, but each one of unique design, shot through the haze, engines pumping and thumping.

They swayed clumsily as they sped towards him, and their guns opened up. These were only the tip of the spear, he knew; there were more behind, and the canyon shuddered with the vibrations caused by the mass of warbikes. He returned fire for a moment, before turning and pelting back towards Guyuk's position. As he ran, Ariq palmed a grenade and whipped it behind him without looking. It didn't actually matter where it landed, so

long as it delayed the orks for a few seconds. *Lucky Ariq, swift Ariq,* he thought.

The ice bucked and writhed beneath his feet and the air was filled with heat and shrapnel. He shouted a warning into the vox as he scrambled across the ice, the crude projectiles punching through the ice and snow all around him. A shape rose up beside him as he pelted past – Guyuk had thrown off his cloak, and the boltgun in his hands thundered as he returned fire. 'How many?' he snarled.

'Too many. Fall back,' Ariq shouted over his shoulder without slowing down. Guyuk cursed and followed him. Weapons fire tore up the sides of the cliff around them, filling the air with splinters of ice and rock. A stray round struck Guyuk in the leg, ripping through armour, cloth, muscle and bone in a spray of red. The leg was shorn off at the knee and Guyuk spun with a howl. He fired his bolter as he crashed down onto the ice, emptying the clip at their foes.

An ork bike exploded, one of Guyuk's shots having found its mark. The others skidded around the wreckage and continued on. Ariq turned and tore two grenades from his webbing. He flung them both with all of his strength, sending them bouncing towards the oncoming bikes. A wash of fire obscured the orks, as the grenades tore apart the ice and the bikes both. The ice split and sank into the water, and debris slid down from the walls of the canyon, sending up a cloud of ice particles and snow.

They were momentarily separated from their pursuers, but Ariq knew it wouldn't last long. The ice would refreeze within moments and the orks would be after them once more. Ariq whirled and lunged for the back of his fellow Scout's armour. He began to haul Guyuk after him, as fast as he was able. The ice rippled beneath his feet and he could hear the grinding din of the greenskin vehicles as they regrouped.

'Leave me,' Guyuk said. He ejected the spent clip from the boltgun and scrabbled for another from his belt. His leg – what was left of it – had ceased bleeding, but the damage had been done. His face was pale and his hands trembled. A full Space Marine might have been able to weather such a wound more easily, but Guyuk was obviously in agony.

Ariq looked down at him. 'What?'

'You'll be faster without me,' Guyuk said tersely, slamming the new clip into place. 'Find me a good clear spot. Leave me your grenades, and

whatever detonators we have left. I'll keep them busy for a few moments, at least, so that you can reach the others.'

Ariq hesitated. Guyuk cursed and gestured to the smeared trail of crimson that extended out behind them. 'Look at that. I was fond of that leg, you know,' he said.

'Brother, I–'

'What? You're sorry? So am I. I can honestly say that I wish it had been you,' Guyuk said. 'But I told you – you're lucky.' He grinned weakly. Even in the teeth of death, a White Scar knew that it was important to laugh. How else would death know what it had caught? 'But I wasn't, and here we are. Luck of the hunt, Ariq.' He jerked his chin towards a spot on the ice. 'There would be good. Nice and open. They won't be able to resist.' He looked at Ariq. 'Well? Hurry up, Ariq.'

Guyuk was right. Ariq knew it, but cursed himself even so as he dragged his brother towards the spot he'd indicated. Guyuk drew his Tulwar and stabbed it into the ice so that he could lean against it. Ariq handed him a bandolier of grenades, and the remaining detonators. Guyuk took them with a nod of thanks.

Ariq crouched beside him for long moments, saying nothing. For once, the words wouldn't come. The smell of the xenos vehicles wafted across the ice, and the ice trembled beneath them. He could hear the guttural howls of orks on the hunt. 'Brother,' was all that he could think of to say.

Guyuk shook his head. 'Shut up and run away now. And don't even think about writing a poem about me, brother,' he said. 'Go on.' Ariq rose and began to run. Behind him, he heard the low, soft sound of Guyuk's death-song begin. He ducked his head and ran faster.

The sound of engines pummelled his ears, rising and mingling with the song. Then came the roar of a bolter, and the shriek of grenades going off. And then, as the song was swept under by the crashing rumble of ork bikes, everything was swallowed up by a sound like thunder on the plains. Ariq was wrenched up and sent flying by the billowing cloud of steam and hot air that was funnelled along the crooked path of the canyon. His exposed flesh turned red and began to peel as he was buffeted by the explosion. The ice cracked and bubbled beneath him as he forced himself up. Freezing water drenched his legs as the ice gave way beneath him. He slid backwards helplessly.

The water swallowed him. The shock of the cold would have killed a normal man. For a Space Marine, it would have been an inconvenience. Ariq knew that he would have several minutes to appreciate the unearthly beauty of the shimmering dark below the ice before the cold overwhelmed him. A flickering corona of blue and black filled his vision as he groped for the surface, which was growing further away and already refreezing into solidity, trapping him. The cold crept slowly into his enhanced muscles, numbing them.

Then the quiet of the cold water was shattered by a fist punching through the ice. He watched it shoot towards him, and felt strong fingers seize one of his floating wrists. Then he was being hauled upwards and out of the water. Air flooded his abused lungs as he was dragged onto the ice. He peered blearily up into Rukn's black eyes. Yunan and Sartaq crouched nearby, firing steadily in the direction Ariq had come.

'They're here,' Ariq coughed. He spat out water.

'So I see,' Rukn said.

'Guyuk's dead.'

'Yes. But you are not. Get up,' Rukn said, hauling him to his feet. 'Cease fire,' he said. Ariq turned and looked back the way he had come. Contorted green bodies bobbed in the swiftly re-forming ice, and thick black smoke swept across its surface.

'That's definitely more than four,' Ariq murmured.

The wind rolling down the canyon carried with it the howl of engines. If any orks had survived their encounter, they would be back soon enough with reinforcements.

Rukn turned. 'Come. Time to go. Our task is not yet done.'

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07:05:10

DC DRILLING STATION, GRID REF. G6

‘Our scouts have reported contact with the enemy. The orks have taken the bait and are even now approaching this platform. Seven promethium tankers have been readied for the purposes of evacuation. The crew of the platform, save for a small contingent, will withdraw when we engage the orks on the ice. Those who remain behind will defend the platform from attack.’

Suboden looked around at the pale faces illuminated in the light of the holographic display. The operations centre for the drilling station was a cluttered affair, full of diode-bestrewn control consoles without obvious purposes to Kanim’s eye. Suboden stood on a dais set into the centre of the room. A holographic projection of the canyon and the drilling station rose from the middle of the dais, and hovered over Suboden like a shroud. As he spoke, he gestured to the map, causing points on it to flash red.

The chamber was crowded with bodies. Adept Lyr had gathered most of the higher echelons of the crew into the packed room, where they shot wary glances at the hulking, white-armoured shapes of Suboden’s small war-council. Kanim studied the latter. Besides himself and Khajog, there was Selim, and Torag the Uquillian, master of Suboden’s assault wing.

Torag stood behind his superior, his lean, dark features hidden behind his helm. Selim was a bad influence on the champion, Kanim knew. He was ambitious, and of uneven temperament, though assiduously loyal to Khajog. Kanim wondered whether it was ambition or awe that drove Selim to defer to Khajog so often. Selim’s fingers traced the flowing script carved into the solid surface of his chest-plate, and he turned to meet Kanim’s gaze. The

wolf teeth set into the front grille of his helmet made it seem as if he were snarling. Kanim looked away and tried to discern the strange, geometric patterns that adorned the vambraces of the Uquillian.

Like Khajog, Torag wore power armour of an older mark – Mark IV, Kanim thought, given the heavy cuirass and the shape of the helmet. He had earned the right to wear it in battle, as Khajog had, though, like all the folk of the great port of Uquill, he seemed determined to express his artistic inclinations by decorating the armour in a fashion that had surely aroused shrieks of protest from the Chapter's artificers. Braids of woven hair hung from the shoulder plates and were strung with feathers taken from the great eagles that haunted the high places of the Khum Kharta Mountains. His helm was decorated with feathers as well, these plated in silver and bronze. The narrow snout of his helmet had been painted to resemble an eagle's cruel beak. Both of the Uquillian's hands were bionic, to replace those which had been lost in a battle with the Dark Eldar.

The Uquillian met Kanim's eyes and inclined his head respectfully. Other than Kanim, Torag was the only warrior of the brotherhood whose advice Suboden actively sought. The Uquillian had a predator's clarity and a philosopher's wisdom for all that his favoured method of combat was to fall out of the sky on top of his enemies. Kanim turned his attentions back to Suboden. The Khan continued to speak. 'And they will attack. They need fuel, and this platform is the only remaining source within easy striking distance of their landing sites on this continent.'

Kanim restrained a grim smile. Suboden was correct, of course. But the reason Dante's Canyon was one of the only remaining sources was that the White Scars themselves had destroyed both Valdez Gamma and Yarrick Point in order to prevent the orks from having access to them. In doing so, they had forced the orks south, onto ground more to the White Scars liking.

Kanim knew that his Khan was playing a dangerous game. The White Scars were too few in number to defend each and every industrial facility in the Deadlands, but actively to destroy such vital operations well before they had come under actual threat, even for a greater strategic goal, was skirting the edge of foolishness. If Dante's Canyon fell, the fuel supply lines to the southern hives, including Helsreach, would be cut entirely. Suboden was gambling an entire hemisphere against the chance to claim the head of the White Scars chosen prey – the warboss of the White Lightning.

They didn’t know the creature’s name, only that it led the largest concentration of mechanised ork tribes on Armageddon, and that its roving warriors had attacked water- processing plants and pipelines throughout the Deadlands. So great were their numbers that the orks had threatened simply to grind the southernmost continent beneath their wheels as they rode. But now their attentions were fixed firmly on Dante’s Canyon and the Tulwar Brotherhood. Their leader was at their head, and his warriors hurtled after him, following him into the trap Suboden had so artfully laid out over the course of weeks. It was even as the Khan-of-Khans had said – create a situation to which the enemy must conform, entice him with something he is certain to take, and await him with appropriate strength.

It mattered little whether the creature was an ambitious warboss, like the so-called Overfiend of Octarius, or simply a servant of one of the hundred such creatures that had followed Ghazghkull Thraka to Armageddon. Regardless of its identity, it and the White Lightning had been marked for destruction, and Suboden would see it done, no matter the cost. Nonetheless, it was, Kanim reflected, a deadly gamble. Luckily the folk of Chogoris were known for their love of games of chance.

Suboden fell silent, and waited patiently for his words to sink in. It was Adept Lyr who was the first to speak, breaking the lull. ‘But I thought you came to protect us from the orks, so that we could keep the platform operational,’ Lyr said, almost plaintively. ‘This platform is an essential link in the southern promethium pipeline.’

‘And that is why it is being used,’ Suboden said. ‘The orks can read the lie of the land as well as we, Adept Lyr.’ There were sour faces and mutters from the gathered civilians at that, but Suboden pressed on. ‘They are coming here, seeking to claim this place for their own. And here is where we will break them.’

‘Or this particular group of them, at any rate,’ Kanim murmured to himself.

‘At the cost of this facility,’ Magos Pitel rasped. The Mechanicum contingent stood slightly apart from the others, which no one seemed to mind. Pitel, however, stood close to Lyr, with a slight air of what, had he – she – been fully human, Kanim might have thought of as protectiveness.

‘And our people,’ Mykel said. ‘What was it you said – a slight contingent? You expect some of us to stay behind as bait, don’t you?’ The woman

crossed her arms and shook her head. ‘I’ll not sacrifice my people just so you can kill more orks.’

‘Not to mention centuries of carefully compiled and meticulously copied records,’ Lyr wailed, in evident anguish. Pitel and Mykel looked at him, and then one another in what Kanim fancied was an expression of long suffering, shared between comrades. Lyr looked about like a lost child. ‘Those records are my life. All our lives! The time-sheets alone…’ he trailed off. Kanim shook his head in bemusement.

Suboden held out his hands. ‘Yes. All of this is true. I make no effort to delude you.’ He looked at each of them in turn. ‘We are the Star Hunt and we have run the orks from one end of this continent to the next,’ he went on. ‘They are frustrated and overeager, even for their kind. The prudent lie in wait for an enemy who is not.’ He gestured, causing the holographic projection to rotate. ‘They will flood this canyon, filling it with their bodies and machines. The ice will shatter, the walls will quake, but the orks will persevere. That is what they do, Adept Lyr. There are too many of them to stop by traditional means. We cannot protect you.’

Lyr slumped. Pitel’s mechadendrite wrapped about his shoulders, almost comfortingly. Lyr wrung his hands. ‘Then what – what – ?’

Suboden smiled, almost gently. ‘You have never hunted, have you, Adept Lyr?’

‘Hunted?’ Lyr squeaked.

‘I have,’ Mykel said. Suboden glanced at her, one eyebrow quirked. She shrugged. ‘You wouldn’t believe the things that sometimes hitch rides on the drills.’

‘Then you know what I mean when I say that the orks must be bloodied before they can be beaten. We must draw away their strength, and force them to come to us on ground of our choice. And that requires bait.’

‘What is he saying, Myk?’ Lyr asked helplessly.

‘We’re the bait,’ Mykel said. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Suboden. ‘They didn’t come to protect us. They came because they knew the orks wouldn’t be able to resist. We don’t matter.’

‘No,’ Suboden said. ‘You do not.’ He spread his hands. ‘None of us matter. The galaxy turns, suns collapse, planets burn, men and women are born, live and die. Even the Star Hunt will eventually run its course, and our temples and honours become only so much ash and dust. Only the

Imperium endures.' He brought his hands together in a loud clap. '*That* is why we are here. To see that the Imperium – that Armageddon – endures.' He grinned widely. 'Killing orks is just a bonus.'

Mykel shook her head. She scrubbed her fingers through her short hair. 'Maybe for you,' she said. Some of her men began to mutter, but she silenced them with a look. Kanim could tell that she, at least, was beginning to understand. She might not like it, but she understood.

Lyr cleared his throat. He was trembling, but he seemed to have regained control of himself. 'What – what do you plan to do, my lord?'

'It has already begun,' Suboden said. He looked at them. 'Our scouts have bloodied the beast, and it pursues them.' He looked at Kanim. 'You will meet its charge, on the ice. You will hold them there, until the time is right, and then we will bloody them beyond measure.'

Kanim nodded in understanding. Rukn and the scouts had been sent out to plant explosives along the narrowest stretch of canyon corridor. When the explosives had been set off, that stretch would become a tomb. Some orks would survive, but not all. If the spirits of ice and snow were with them, they could cut the ork numbers by a third or more in one go, and slow the bulk of the horde considerably. 'And then?' he asked.

'You will do as we have always done. You will strike hard, and fade away. Pull them after you, to the drilling station. They will come eagerly to death's waiting arms and we shall not hinder them.' Suboden looked at Mykel. 'That is where you come in, Guildmaster.' He motioned to the hologram and the outline of the canyon rotated until it was vertical. Suboden traced it with a fingertip. 'The orks are not confined to the ice alone. They can climb as well as we, and they ride the winds. They will make for the platform without stopping, regardless of what happens on the ice. Since we have no air support, we must do what we can, with what we have.' He looked at Mykel. 'Your men will serve as meat in the trap. If the orks think that the station is heavily defended, they may hesitate. They draw their courage from numbers and strength. Your men will be seen as little more than entertainment. They will believe that all of the Tulwar Brotherhood has ridden out to meet them, and they will seize the moment we have provided greedily and without thought.'

Mykel frowned, but didn't disagree. She was old enough to have lived through the first ork invasion, Kanim thought, judging by the telltale signs

of juvenat treatments. The greenskins were the perfect prey for the White Scars, but to normal humans they were monsters. One ork could wreak untold havoc amongst unprepared or untrained mortals. ‘The orks shall descend on this place – the leaders, the chieftains and champions of their kind, eager to claim their prize and their glory. And that, brother, is when you will spring.’ He thrust a hand towards Khajog, who started in surprise. ‘You will be the jaws of the trap, snapping shut to hold fast to the head of our foe.’ He glanced at Kanim, as if for reassurance.

Kanim nodded and thumped the floor with the end of his staff. ‘The spirits of this place can feel his approach, like an oncoming storm. The beast we hunt will not cross the ice, but will ride the wind like a singularly ungraceful and ugly eagle.’

‘You will defend this place,’ Suboden said, still looking at Khajog. ‘You will have command. Your orders are to hold.’

‘Until?’ Khajog demanded.

‘There is no until,’ Suboden said. ‘You will hold.’

‘No. Let Kanim meet him here. Or the Uquillian,’ Khajog barked. He smashed his fist into his chest. ‘Let me ride out, my Khan. A champion’s place is at the red edge of things, not hiding here, with them.’ He flung out his hand to indicate Mykel, who flushed in anger. The woman was about to speak, but Khajog continued on, speaking over any reply she might have made. ‘I will not fight beside them,’ he said loudly. ‘Let one of the others play nursemaid. I am the sword of the Tulwar Brotherhood. My place is in the heart of battle, not striking from the shadows, or hiding behind walls. I am no hunter, my Khan, I am a killer. Let me kill!’ He was pleading now, and there wasn’t a White Scar present who did not understand that plea. To be asked to stand by, to wait, while blood was shed and scalps collected was anathema to them all. But for warriors like Khajog, it was agony. Kanim saw Selim shift uncomfortably, and the Uquillian was nodding slowly. Even Suboden’s expression wasn’t as sure as it had been a moment before.

The order had been intended as Khajog’s punishment, Kanim knew. Khajog had almost committed a grievous crime due to his impatience and arrogance. Now he was to be kept from the only thing that gave him a sense of purpose. Suboden thought it a lesson. But Khajog saw it as an insult. Already he had challenged his Khan’s orders openly, before the eyes of the humans. Kanim heard the whispers of the spirits growing louder in his ears.

This, then, was the flaw of the White Scars made manifest. The great weakness in them, which was also a strength. The desire to stand apart and alone, and to act and adapt to what came of that action. To laugh and kill and be content. Kanim watched through slitted eyes as Khajog looked about him. ‘We should all ride out,’ he went on. ‘All of us, my Khan. Why else have we baited them in, if not to cut them to ribbons? Why shed blood for these wastelings? Let them flee with the others, let us simply wire this place with explosives and watch it burn. If the orks want it, they can have it as a tomb.’ He held out his hands, palms up. ‘Let us do this thing properly, if it must be done, my Khan. Let us show this world how White Scars fight!’

The words were spoken bluntly, without poetry, but they were stirring nonetheless. Traps and schemes were cages to thought and action, and there was nothing the sons of Jaghatai hated more than a cage. The White Scars were the eye of the whirlwind, moving constantly, relying on tactics rather than strategy. Let the enemy waste his time with plans. Plans, like supply lines and fortifications, were things that could be destroyed to harm the enemy. Khajog’s words spoke directly to the frustrations that they had all felt over these long weeks as they drew the orks ever further south.

Suboden would give in. He had ever given Khajog his due and more, though the champion infuriated him at times. Khajog was the best and the worst of them made flesh, and it was hard to deny his words and pleas, for what warrior did not wish for battle after so long without? Kanim saw it all, and more besides. The White Scars would triumph if they rode out, and Khajog would eventually become captain in his turn, when Suboden fell to whatever fate awaited him, but nothing more. Fate would be thwarted, and death sated, though he could not say why. The spirits rarely revealed the reason for their whims.

Kanim felt the world shudder about him as the skeins of fate and destiny drew taut. Here was the moment the spirits had whispered of, come around at last. He closed his eyes as images tumbled through his mind – he saw a world beset by war, and a giant in baroque black armour, wielding a wailing daemon blade, who commanded legions without number; a world of brass cogs and ticking chronometers; fortress citadels besieged but saved from destruction, because of one warrior, who understood the value of mortal lives; a Cadian Pylon, rising from the sea; and finally, Khajog, his back to the water, his armour ravaged and ruined, his Tulwar shining as he met the

enemy one last time, having saved untold millions, and his only reward… Kanim shuddered in sympathy. This, then, was Khajog's fate if he were to step in and stop what was about to happen.

He hesitated. The whispers of the spirits grew louder. He slammed the end of his staff down. 'A champion's place, you say? A champion's place is where his Khan says it is,' he said, without thunder or anger. His calm in the face of Khajog's snarling insubordination was like a knife across flesh, stilling the latter's anger. 'Or do you disagree, brother?'

Khajog blinked. He hesitated, mouth open. But Suboden seized the moment, as Kanim hoped he would. 'To ride out is our way, brother. But so too is the long hunt. Whether we fight them wheel to wheel, or tear them apart piecemeal, the enemy falls by our hand. That is all that matters.' Suboden looked at Khajog. 'Will you do as I command, brother?'

'But–' Khajog began, his face flushing. Suboden was as still as a statue. He said nothing, merely looking at the champion with a serene expression. It was the same look that a bird of prey might give something that squirmed in its talon. Kanim had restored the equilibrium between Khan and champion, and both knew it. Khajog's moment had passed. He nodded and stepped back, one hand on the hilt of his Tulwar. Suboden waited, still watching him. Kanim reached out with his staff and gently nudged Khajog. The champion jerked and said, 'I will hold, as my Khan commands.'

'I am glad to hear it, brother.' Suboden let his gaze flicker across the silent faces of his White Scars. 'Selim shall be your second-in-command.' He pointed at the Space Marine. 'This is your punishment, for failing to speak sense when you had the chance. You followed him in his foolishness, and you will follow him in his penance.'

Khajog looked up. 'And what about you, my Khan?' he asked, with only a hint of his previous defiance. 'What will you be doing?'

'I?' Suboden drew his sword partially from its sheath and slammed it back down. 'I will claim my due as Khan, and as master of the Tulwar Brotherhood.'

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07:07:50

WEST OF DC DRILLING STATION

Rukn led Ariq and the others back along the top of the canyon walls, ahead of the ork forces that were now streaming into the canyon. As Ariq scrambled across the narrow ledge of rock after the others, he glanced down. Far below him, the ork vehicles caromed across the ice, occasionally crashing into one another or the wall of the canyon. Sometimes, they even exploded for no apparent reason. Crude cannons rumbled, chewing the walls of the canyon, or even pulverising smaller vehicles, as the gunners gave voice to guttural roars of laughter that carried easily on the cold wind. Death stalked the hain, but not as a hunter – rather, it followed them as an overfed scavenger might keep on the trail of a successful, if unobservant band of hunters. There would be no shortage of dying, when the orks were on the move.

Guyuk's parting blow hadn't slowed the greenskins down for very long, more was the pity. They had done what they could to slow the steady, churning advance in order to give the rest of the White Scars time to get into position, but the orks were in no mood for 'slow' – each and every vehicle, from bikes to trikes to buggies to the bigger four-wheeled armoured troop carriers, had been refitted for travel over the ice. Skis and sledges were both in evidence, and several of the larger vehicles had been fitted with rickety pontoons that did little to keep the hulking masses of metal from skidding and cracking the ice beneath their treads.

Rukn paused. He held up a hand. 'Wait,' he said.

Ariq realised that it wasn't the vehicles below that had caught Rukn's attention. A new sound pierced the monotonous cacophony rising from the

ice path. It was a shrill, rattling whine that caused Ariq's teeth to itch in his gums. 'What in the name of Ogdai is that?' Yunan hissed.

Ariq shook his head as he stared at the black, boxy vulture-winged shapes, wreathed in fumes and smoke, which hurtled along through the snow-choked air. He'd known that orks had their own primitive sort of aircraft, but the things that had begun strafing the canyon walls were something new. They reminded him, in a faint, wholly distasteful way, of the Chapter's own Thunderhawk gunships. In a fairer world there would be no way such craft would be able to get off the ground without exploding. 'What are they shooting at?'

'Everything,' Rukn said. He pointed. 'There.' He indicated a crevice in the cliff face. 'Move, hurry.' Explosions tore the air, moving closer. The scouts hurried to follow Rukn into cover as the ork aircraft screamed towards them. The orks might not have been hunting for them, but there was still every chance one of them would be caught by the indiscriminate firing.

'Well, that is an unpleasant surprise,' Ariq muttered, as he accepted Sartaq's offer of a helping hand. The crevice was a narrow gouge in the underside of an outcropping on the canyon wall. It was big enough for the four of them, though only just.

'Yes, who'd have thought orks could fly?' Yunan said.

'Why would you think they couldn't?' Sartaq muttered, peering around the edge of the crevice. 'They travel through space on asteroids that they stabbed with engines. Nothing they do is surprising.'

'Never be surprised by the enemy,' Rukn said. 'Adapt, move, persevere.'

'And when that fails, run,' Ariq said jovially.

Rukn slapped him on the back of the head. 'Never run without a destination in mind,' he said. Ariq rubbed his head. 'Running won't help now, however. Too fast,' Rukn muttered. 'They'd spot us for sure.'

The sergeant's eyes were narrowed in calculation as he stared out of the crevice. The flyers would be in sight within a few moments. Ariq knew from experience that Rukn could formulate, consider and discard a thousand strategies in the time that it took another man to inhale. 'No way to outpace them. We need to slow them down.'

'I can draw their fire – give the squad a chance to move,' Ariq said, hefting his bolter.

'Useless,' Rukn said, not looking at him. 'You wouldn't last long enough.'

‘I’ll do it,’ said Sartaq. He made to get to his feet, but Rukn stopped him.

‘No. Watch. Learn. Follow,’ he said. He drew his combat knife and swung out of the crevice, onto the canyon wall, with a smooth grace born of a warrior’s certainty.

Ariq exchanged glances with the others and then gestured. ‘Well, you heard the man,’ he said. They clambered out of the crevice to join their sergeant in the open, and Ariq couldn’t help but flinch as the very air vibrated with the roar of the approaching aircraft. ‘What now?’ he asked loudly, in order to be heard over the noise.

Rukn sniffed. ‘We cannot run. We must slow them. So we fight.’

‘With knives?’

Rukn smiled. Even as the lead ork flyer sped past below them, guns roaring, he sprang from his perch and plummeted downwards, like an eagle swooping to catch its prey. He slammed into the side of the flyer. Ariq could only watch in amazement as Rukn pierced the ramshackle hull with his blade and anchored himself to it. The ork gunners had yet to notice him, being more concerned with wildly unloading every single bit of ammunition into the canyon walls.

A moment later, as the next flyer drew close, Ariq flung himself off the lip of the crevice as Rukn had done. He had no time to see whether the others had followed. The air tore at him with frigid claws and he wondered if it were possible to suffocate in midair. The thought was driven from his mind by a wash of pain as he slammed into the top of one of the aircraft. On landing, he was almost torn off by the vehicle’s acceleration. He rammed his combat knife into a crack between hull plates. His muscles screamed in agony, but he blocked out the pain and flattened himself against the hull. He raised his head with difficulty and saw that Rukn was already hard at work on his flyer, which was racing ahead .

Ariq watched as Rukn hauled himself towards the open side, using his knife like a mountaineer’s piton. As he drew close, he snatched a grenade from his webbing and sent it spinning into the interior of the vessel. By the time it exploded, Rukn had already clambered atop the careening vessel’s hull.

The wounded flyer vented greasy smoke and its manoeuvring became even more erratic, though that seemed scarcely possible. It slammed against the walls of the canyon, veering first one way and then another as flames

gouted from its interior, and unspent ammunition cooked off. It veered towards the one Ariq clung to, and he forced himself up. Suddenly, one of the hatches on the top was flung open, nearly knocking him from his feet. An ork clambered out, a mismatched pair of goggles covering its eyes and a knife clutched between its teeth.

It slid the knife from between its tusks and bellowed something that sounded like a challenge. ‘No,’ Ariq replied. He risked a quick movement to grab his bolter where it dangled from its strap. The ork scrambled towards him, seemingly heedless of the precarious nature of the battlefield. Ariq fell onto his back and fired. The bolt-rounds caught the ork as it leapt, and the force of the shots sent it spinning off and away, where it was plucked out of sight by the slipstream. Before he had a chance to congratulate himself, however, the flyer that Rukn had damaged crashed against the one he lay on, causing it to shudder like a dying animal. Ariq lost his balance and the air claimed him, yanking him off the hull. He lost hold of his bolter as he pitched into the void.

A hand caught his, and he slammed into the side of the craft with tooth-rattling force. He looked up into the eyes of Rukn, who shook his head. ‘You’re making this a habit, brother,’ he said. He realised that the sergeant must have traded perches when the two aircraft collided.

‘What, surviving? Good habit to have, I think,’ Ariq wheezed. As Rukn hauled him up, he glanced back and saw several more boxy shapes hurtling through the air, belching smoke and gunfire in equal measure. His heart turned cold as he saw orks wearing what passed for jump packs amongst their kind clambering across their hulls like insects.

‘Luck is its own skill,’ Rukn said. He whipped around, sending Ariq slamming headfirst into the gut-plate of an ork who’d been readying a skull-pulping blow behind them. Ariq fell onto all fours, his head spinning. ‘Few I teach possess it in great quantity. Can’t teach luck,’ Rukn said as he stepped over him, moving gracefully across the top of the bucking, pitching craft. The ork charged him, and he bent low, lunged and spun aside, his knife flashing. The ork wobbled and fell as its feet became tangled in its own intestines. It rolled across the top and vanished with a frustrated cry.

Rukn turned as more greenskins clambered out of the hatches that were strewn willy-nilly across the hull. The orks seemed excited by the prospect of hand-to-hand combat at such an altitude, Ariq reflected sourly as he tried

to get his feet under him. He heard the distant explosions that heralded the ork jump-troops launching themselves towards what they probably considered long-overdue recreation. ‘We’re about to have visitors,’ he snarled, snatching up his knife from where it was still jammed into the hull.

‘Good. Something for me to do while you requisition this conveyance, brother,’ Rukn said, as he eyed the approaching orks with a calculating eye.

‘What?’ Ariq looked at him.

Rukn made a gesture of dismissal. ‘Get to it. These scalps are mine.’

Ariq didn’t press the point. He swung himself off the top of the craft onto the side, and almost collided with Sartaq, who was climbing up from the opposite direction. Ariq hung from the hull and looked down at his brother. ‘Yunan?’

Sartaq shook his head, his face as hard as stone. Ariq felt his heart sink. He hadn’t known the other Scout well, but another loss so soon after Guyuk was hard to bear. He didn’t ask how it had happened. Instead, he slammed a fist against the side of the craft they clung to. ‘We need to get in there,’ he shouted, fighting to be heard over the roar of the wind whipping past. ‘Rukn has decreed that we claim this pile of junk for the Chapter’s due.’

‘My pleasure,’ Sartaq grunted. He caught hold of a loose plate and gave a yank. Muscles swelled and metal groaned and then, with a shrill pop, the plate was spinning away. Ariq swung inside, the soles of his boots connecting with the skull of the ork who had been lurching forward to see what had happened. The creature flopped backwards, and Ariq was on it in the next moment, his thumbs digging for its eyes.

Sartaq forced his way into the craft a moment later, and his bolter thundered, obscenely loud in the cramped confines as he dispatched the pilots. Ariq smashed his opponent’s skull against the deck, and was rewarded with a sharp crack. The ork’s paws still fumbled at his neck, however, and he was forced to repeat his action several times before the xenos finally went still. He didn’t mind. It helped purge some of the anger he felt for Guyuk and Yunan. Ariq looked around as the craft shuddered. He saw the face of the canyon draw unpleasantly close through the hatch and scrambled aside as sparks, ice and rock suddenly pelted the interior. He wondered whether Rukn was still alive.

He pushed the thought aside as he lunged to his feet and clambered towards the pilot’s compartment. Two orks lay in a heap on the floor, their

blood making the floor treacherously slick. Sartaq sat in one of the badly designed seats, jerking ineffectually at the control stick. ‘I found Yunan,’ he said, pointing to the front of the craft. Ariq saw Yunan crouched on the nose of the craft, a somewhat panicked expression on his face.

Ariq hauled himself up and booted part of the windscreen out. ‘Please, brother, my yurt is always open,’ he said, helping the other scout in. ‘How in the name of the Star Horse did you find yourself out there?’

‘I jumped with my eyes closed,’ Yunan said. He frowned. ‘Lost my bolter too.’

‘Better than your life. On the plus side, we now have transportation,’ Ariq said.

‘Where’s Rukn?’ Yunan said.

An ork smashed into the spot where Yunan had been crouching only moments before and pinwheeled away, its jump pack still emitting flames. Ariq lifted a finger. ‘Up there,’ he said. ‘Can you fly this thing?’ he asked Sartaq.

‘No,’ Sartaq said. ‘It seems to be going in the right direction, though.’

‘Small favours are the mortar of the walls of fortune,’ Yunan said piously.

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07:09:22

SOMEWHERE IN THE AIR, WEST OF DC DRILLING STATION

‘Are we close?’ Rukn asked, peering at the cracked windscreen. Snow pelted past as the craft burrowed through the swirling wind-borne wall of white. Frost clung to the metal inside, and their breath hung about their heads in cloudy plumes. When Rukn had climbed down to join them, his limbs had been streaked with ork blood and his armour was coated in frozen chunks of more of the same. There was ice in his beard, and his topknot crackled when he touched it, but he didn’t seem bothered. Rukn might as well as have been a rock, for all that the weather bothered him.

‘Yes?’ Sartaq asked. He didn’t sound confident, Ariq thought.

Rukn patted his shoulder and gestured to Ariq and Yunan. ‘Good. Come with me.’ They followed him into the cluttered rear of the craft. Through the open hatches they could see the pursuing vessels. The orks had had more aircraft than Ariq had thought. There were at least three more of the graceless things barrelling through the air in pursuit. Closer inspection of the craft they had commandeered had revealed that it had once been an Imperial Guard Valkyrie, before the orks had got their paws on it. The others most likely had similar origins. The orks could warp even the strongest and most sacred of machine-spirits to their brute purpose with enough time and, apparently, rivets. He went to the rear hatch and peered through a gun slit. ‘I don’t think they’ve noticed that we’re here yet.’

‘No,’ Rukn said. ‘We need to slow them down. We’re flying too fast. They are too intent on reaching the drilling station. Orks can only hold one thought in their head at a time,’ he said and tapped his head. He interlaced his fingers. ‘If they reach the drilling station before the proper time, the trap

will fail to close properly. The Tulwar Brotherhood will be fighting a war on two fronts.'

'And so? What can we do?' Yunan asked.

'We give them something else to chase,' Rukn said. He gently pushed Ariq aside and smashed a large red button with his fist. The rear hatch began to open with a screech of abused metal.

'We've only got one bolter between us – how exactly are we going to get their attention? Rude gestures?' Ariq asked, grabbing hold of a strap hanging from the roof, as the wind began to tear at him.

'I know a bit of orkish,' Yunan said. 'It's mostly insults. We could shout harshly at them.'

'Both good ideas,' Rukn said approvingly. 'I have a better one.' He bent and hefted an ork gun. It resembled a primitive autocannon, and had both ammunition clips and feed belts, which, to Ariq, seemed to be unnecessary modifications. The weapon had a tripod and Rukn kicked it into place and set the gun up, facing out of the rear hatch. Ariq's flesh crawled as he realised what Rukn intended.

'We can't use these things,' he said, in disgust. 'They are corrupted xenos tools.'

Rukn looked at him steadily. 'Yes. They are also weapons. And as you yourself pointed out, we are in need of such. I know that your stomach churns at the thought of employing such things – mine does as well. But it is necessary,' he said. 'We have our mission, brothers, we have our sacred duty, and to fail at it because we are squeamish is the worst sort of failure.' He gazed at each of them in turn. 'We are weapons, brothers. We are the Emperor's hunting eagles, and it is not for us to question the tools he places in our talons.' He smiled. 'Besides, you are the fools who lost your bolters. Some penance is to be expected, and this will serve as well as any. Ariq, take this one.'

He moved aside, and Ariq took his place, albeit reluctantly. The hatch had fully lowered, and he could clearly make out the closest of the ork craft through the howling snow. He took a breath. Rukn was right. Rukn was always right. They were the hands of the Emperor in this place, in this moment, and they could do no less than to employ the bounty he had given them. He set himself, and took aim.

The gun clicked. He blinked, and looked down. He pulled the triggers

again. He looked up. The craft behind them had drawn closer, and he could see the ork pilot through the ice-encrusted canopy. The ork was howling at his fellows and gesticulating furiously. Ariq pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened.

'I can't get it to work,' he said, shaking the weapon on its swivel. The side hatches of the craft behind them flew open, and orks leapt out with wild cries. For a moment, he thought that their desire to get to grips with their enemy had prompted them to fling themselves to their doom, but when the first ork rose on a plume of flame, he realised that they were assault troops.

He squeezed the firing mechanisms and shook it again. The orks spiralled closer on corkscrews of flame. Small arms fire struck the frame of the hatch and ricocheted off the hull. Rukn hauled him away from the weapon and stepped up to it, a heavy ork-made tool in one hand. 'These things require a deft touch,' he said, conversationally. 'A bit of finesse is needed.' He struck the gun several sharp, loud blows with the tool before tossing the latter aside.

He squeezed the firing mechanisms and the gun burped. Spent shell casings flew from the ejection port and Ariq was forced to raise his hand to shield his face. 'There we go,' Rukn said, swinging the gun around. Orks fell from the air, wreathed in flame. He continued to fire, sweeping the barrel of the gun across the path of the other aircraft.

The gun was suddenly torn from its mount by a heavy boot. One of the orks had managed to reach them, and the alien began to haul itself through the hatch, its rocket-pack venting stinking fumes into the confined space. Rukn moved to stop it, but gave a grunt of pain as the ork's large, chopping blade came down on his shoulder pad, cracking it and knocking him to his knee. He grabbed the ork's arm with both hands and said, 'Ariq, earn your topknot.'

Ariq jerked forwards. His fist crashed into the ork's face. Bone crumpled and his hand went numb as the ork reared back, blood streaming from its contorted features. It attempted to escape, but Rukn held tight to it. Ariq snatched Rukn's bolt pistol from its holster and fired into the xenos's skull. Rukn released its arm and the body toppled out of the hatch.

'Very good,' Rukn said as he pried the blade from his shoulder with a grunt. Blood welled for a moment before the wound began to clot, and Rukn cautiously rotated his arm, testing it. He stabbed the blade into the

side of the hatch and extended his hand. Ariq placed the bolt pistol into it. ‘Thank you,’ Rukn said, holstering the weapon.

‘It is my honour to serve,’ Ariq said. He winced as Rukn smacked the back of his head.

‘Impertinence,’ Rukn said. ‘Help me find another gun that looks relatively functional. We have more orks to kill.’

WESTERN BOTTLENECK, GRID REF. F4

Through the eyes of Kanim’s helmet, the world was awash with information. Readouts measuring everything from his respiration to the heat of his bike’s idling engine and the direction and speed of the wind scrolled across the inside of his lenses. In one corner, a chronometer ticked down. It was almost time, if Rukn were correct. Kanim snorted. There was no question there, at least. Better to ask if the sun would rise, than whether Rukn was correct. He had never known the White Scar to be wrong.

It had taken them longer than he’d liked to reach the bottleneck in the canyon, even with the bikes, but speed had been a necessary sacrifice. The ice was shifting and thinning in places, thanks to the orks. The vibrations of their approach filled the canyon, sending ice falling from the heights and cracking that which extended beneath their wheels. In his head, the spirits whispered of what was coming, and what had gone before, and he blocked out their voices with a skill born of long practice. Sometimes their voices became too much even for one trained in their speech. The ghost-road was wearying to travel, even when you knew its secret ways.

He tightened his grip on his staff. He recalled Khajog’s face, as he and the others had ridden out to war, leaving him behind. The champion had not been happy. His expression had reminded Kanim of a whipped dog, surly and uncomprehending at his current situation. But he had to learn patience, that there were other strategies than that of the Eagle. Tortoise, Wolf and Wasp – the war-makers of the White Scars had as many plans as there were stars in the sky, and a true champion must know them all, whatever his inclination. There was no true path; whatever path a White Scar chose was the correct one.

He glanced at his staff, noting the faint discoloration that marked the

metal. The staff of one chosen to ride the White Road was, prior to his initiation, set into a high place where it would be kissed by the lightning, and the spirits wrought into it at its making awakened. It was the final step on the path of the zadyin arga to pierce the storm and take his staff in hand for the first time. If he survived the fury of the storm, then he was worthy of taking on the mantle of the Stormseer.

Only one who had mastered the storm could be trusted to guide the warriors of the Star Hunt. Theirs had always been the way of the storm, the sudden darkness, the crash of thunder, the slash of lightning, the pounding of wild snows and heavy rains. The lightning was in their blood and its ancient fury had carried their ancestors from one side of Chogoris to the other, carrying fire and steel to every corner of that wide world. But like storms, the warriors of the ordu could be uncontrolled and dangerous. Warriors like Khajog, who had eyes only for blood and glory.

Kanim dismissed the thought with a twitch of his lips. That was for another time. Now was for war. Now he had stepped off the White Road and onto the Red. He tilted his head, and inhaled. He smelled orks. The wind carried their stink to his nose, and the coughing grind of their abominable vehicles to his ears, and he raised his staff. Around him, the hundred-score riders of the Red Road fell silent. White-armoured forms, perched lazily in the saddles of their iron steeds, stiffened. Each Space Marine became as still as a wolf of the steppes scenting its prey. Trophy racks and scalp-poles swayed above the lean shapes of stripped attack bikes, and ragged silk pennants rippled like serpents in the wind. The snow fell steadily, though not heavily. Their bikes had not been modified for travel on the ice. Every White Scar was a master of the road, whether it be made of tarmac, rock or ice. Kanim himself had once ridden through the streets of a battle-breached lunar dome even as its atmosphere was sucked out into the void. That had been more of a challenge than ice.

Kanim struck the ice with the end of his staff. The falling of the snow, desultory before, suddenly became more erratic. The snow would cover their approach and hide their numbers from the orks. The greenskins drew much of their courage from numbers – theirs and that of their enemy. He raised his staff again. There were formalities to be observed. The death-song must be sung, and the killing laugh stirred.

‘It is a good day, is it not, brothers?’ Kanim murmured. He knew that his

words would reach the ear of every White Scar gathered in the bottleneck of the canyon. Heads nodded, and warriors cried out assent. Kanim grinned. ‘It is the best day, for it is a day we meet the prey the Emperor himself gave unto us. The hain are ours. Others may hunt them, but only at our sufferance. We are magnanimous, are we not, brothers?’

More shouts now, and laughter as well. Kanim looked at them, and felt pride. They were truly the favoured sons of the Khan-of-Khans, born and bred to bring death to the enemy. Their armour was the colour of bones bleached beneath the suns of Chogoris, marked by the red blood of their enemies and the golden gaze of Jaghatai himself. Moving amongst them, he saw the ghosts of warriors fallen, and his pride was marked by sadness. Every suit of power armour arrayed about him had known multiple owners, and the hungry ghosts of those long-dead owners in some cases still clung to the anointed curves of ceramite, unwilling to relinquish their place in the Star Hunt.

That was what it meant to be a White Scar. That was what it meant to be chosen to fly and bring doom to the enemies of the Khan-of-Khans. To be ever-hungry for the blood of those enemies, so that not even death itself could bar you from seeking to ride out. But ghosts or no, they were his brothers, and he welcomed them. He spread his arms, and felt the lightning stir in him. It crackled about his arms and head, and his brothers straightened in their saddles. ‘We are the tip of the Emperor’s spear, brothers. We are the first to draw blood, the first to see the fear in the eyes of the enemy, and the first to teach them the error of their ways. We are not Humanity’s shield, brothers. We are not its warding blade. We are its killing song, and we ride the stars to tell our enemies that where we pass, only death remains,’ he said, his voice steadily growing in volume.

Above him, the ice murmured. The orks were drawing closer. The wind stirred and he thumped the ground again. He could smell smoke and oil and rust. ‘Our enemy calls to us, and we must go, brothers. We must greet him, and bloody him, and draw him in to his waiting tomb.’ He swept his gaze across the gathered Space Marines. Names appeared in his mind – he knew each of them, and he knew which of them would live, and which would die. The shadow of death covered the faces of some, and he knew that the company of ghosts would grow larger before the battle was done. He cranked his bike to life, and felt the rumble of its spirit in his bones. It

longed to hurl itself into the enemy, and he shared that longing.

At his signal, the others did the same. A hundred engines growled in unison, and blades flashed as their wielders thrust them into the air. It was a sight to make the blood race and the heart sing, and there was nowhere else that Kanim would rather be at this moment. He spun his bike in a tight semicircle and thrust his staff out before him. ‘Let us ride,’ he roared. The bike leapt forwards and he heard the others follow suit behind him. The canyon shook as they rode to meet the enemy.

The bottleneck opened out into a wide space, where jagged talons of rock pierced the thickly packed ice. The area was shrouded in smoke. Everything reverberated with the rattling groan of ork engines. The horde spread out like a drop of oil on water as they zoomed towards the approaching White Scars. The snow was falling thick and fast now, and Kanim knew that the greenskins had yet to notice them. The noise of their own vehicles, echoing as it was from the crooked confines of the canyon, would mask the sound of the White Scars bikes.

‘We shall follow the strategy of Wasp, brothers. Sting as many as you can, and fly away before they know you are near,’ Kanim said. A chorus of assent filtered through his vox. There were many strategies available to the riders of the Star Hunt, but few as effective or deadly as Wasp, in which each White Scar became an army unto himself, causing as much damage to the enemy as possible as quickly as he was able.

Through the swirling snow he could see the ork vehicles. He noted that they had adapted their vehicles to travel on the ice, and felt a rush of something that might have been respect. They were clever prey, sometimes, and clever prey was the best prey.

‘Time to bloody their haunches, brothers,’ Kanim said into the vox. ‘Strike hard and ride fast. And remember laugh as you kill, so that death might know which of us is prey.’ He tilted his bike and shot towards the left flank of the approaching horde. The White Scars split up, each rider aiming his bike at a point in the ork line. They would pierce the body of the beast like arrows and tear through its heart before retreating back the way they’d come to regroup. It was an old tactic, but a useful one, especially when used against an enemy like the ork, which fought as unruly mobs of individuals rather than organised units.

Kanim let his staff slide through his grip until the head was scraping on the

ice. Where the staff touched, ice cracked and blossomed like a flower on the floor of hell, and the air was filled with the crack and crash of cruel glaciers. The spirits rode with him, loping at his side like faithful hounds, their forms lean and athirst in the swirl of snow, and the bursting ice was their howling. His heart swelled, and blood pounded in his ears. Armageddon was angry. It had been wounded by the orks, its skin pockmarked with craters, and its air befouled by their malign industry. Its wounds seethed with green maggots and he could hear its rage, and its desire to be free of their crawling numbers.

As he shot towards a knot of heavy-bellied four-wheeled troop transports, his arm tensed, and his mind became as a hook, catching the spirit of the ice and dragging it behind him. He coursed between the lead vehicles, and jerked his staff up. The ice heaved in his wake, like an animal waking from a long slumber, and the ork vehicles exploded as great fangs of ice pierced them or crushed them. The screams of the hain were as music to him.

More screams and explosions followed as his brothers swept through the disorganised horde. The orks were surprised, under attack from enemies that they only saw after blood had been drawn. The guns mounted on the vehicles opened up, spraying the canyon walls and the ice. Confusion was as much a weapon as a blade, Kanim knew, and it was one that their current strategy employed to good effect. Individually, the White Scars would be overwhelmed, but moving swiftly, striking once and moving on to a new target, they could hide their numbers and cause the ever-belligerent orks to fight amongst themselves.

Even as the thought occurred to him, he saw it in action. The greenskins were puppets to their own in-built animosity, and when no enemy was immediately to hand, they would vent their rage on each other. A brawl broke out in the back of an open-topped four-wheeler, causing its sledges to skew wildly.

Kanim leaned away, zipping past the vehicle. He saw several white streaks alongside him, and he watched as one of the White Scars shattered an ork biker’s ski with his power-lance. The out-of-control bike spun and flipped, crashing down onto the ice. Ork bikers and White Scars duelled in tight circles across the ice, trading blows or shots. The laughter of the Space Marines warred with that of the orks as they fought.

Kanim struck out at an ork with his staff as his bike thundered past. The

ork's head turned to pulp as the hard length of the staff shattered its skull. Kanim gave a shout and swept his staff up, grasping it like a spear. Lightning crackled along its length, and he hunched forwards in his seat. A bolt of crackling energy ripped from the staff and boiled through the falling snow to strike an oncoming ork vehicle head-on. The vehicle flipped into the air as if it had struck a wall, its crew howling in surprise. It crashed down behind Kanim as he sped on.

Nearby, White Scars slung grenades into the open compartments of ork vehicles, or sent them rolling beneath their skis. The ice heaved and splintered, shattering and pulling burning vehicles down into the cold waters. But there seemed to be no limit to the greenskins. They poured across the ice like spreading oil, and they outnumbered their attackers almost twenty to one. Kanim shot between two war-trucks, caressing their shuddering engines with his lightning, and causing them to explode.

Shots spattered against his power armour, and he twisted in his saddle. A trio of ork bikers drove towards him. He tilted to the side and slammed his foot down, physically wrenching the bike around, before shooting forward to meet them. The twin-linked bolters mounted on the front of his bike roared and two of the orks skidded and toppled, wreathed in oily flames. The third kept coming, its rider jumping up and down in eagerness.

The ork leapt from its seat as its bike disintegrated. Green fingers sought Kanim's throat and he toppled backwards as his bike overbalanced with the sudden addition of the ork's weight. His staff rolled away across the ice and the breath was knocked from his lungs. He shoved himself up, dazed by the mindless ferocity of the ork's attack.

The horde continued to churn past him. Suboden had been right – the attack wouldn't stop the orks. It would only encourage them to keep going, certain that there was a bigger fight in the offing. He was forced to scramble aside as an ork trike skidded past, spraying him with chips of ice and slush.

He heard a roar and turned. The ork heaved his bike into the air, its muscles bulging with effort as it slammed its improvised weapon down, nearly crushing Kanim. He rolled aside and pushed himself to his feet. There was no time to recover his staff. He jerked back as the front wheel of his bike nearly took his head off. The ork lost its grip on the bike and dropped it. Kanim seized his chance and darted forward. He caught the beast's head in his hands, and summoned the lightning. The ork squealed

and, for a moment, he could see its bones beneath its flesh as he poured the fury of the storm into its twitching frame. He ripped his hands free of its charred skull and let it fall. Smoke wreathed his hands as he hauled his bike up and climbed astride it once more. It hadn't been badly damaged, but he could hear the complaint in its growl as he cranked it back to life.

He leaned over and snatched up his staff. Overhead, the light of the sun was momentarily blotted out by the passage of dark shapes, hurtling in the direction of the drilling station. Gunfire echoed down from above. He looked up and his eyes widened slightly as the aircraft tore through the air overhead. They traded fire, and bits of burning debris and bodies fell like raindrops. He caught sight of a flash of white armour aboard one of the aircraft and he gave a bark of laughter. Trust Rukn to turn the enemy's own weaponry against them.

If the flyers were here, that meant it was time to leave. 'Brothers,' he roared, 'it is time for us to lead them into the jaws of the trap.' He slashed his staff out, causing the snow to whirl more fiercely around the ork vehicles, blinding those whose speed was the greatest. 'Fall back through the bottleneck.'

Slowly, those who could disengaged. There were fewer white power-armoured bodies left in the snow than Kanim had feared, but more than he'd hoped. The strategy had not been without its risks, and every White Scar knew that each ride could be their last. If Suboden's plan succeeded, they would return later to collect the dead. And if it failed – well, then there would be no later. Victory was never the sweeter than when it was balanced by death. He gunned his engine, urging his bike to greater speed. He lifted his staff over his head, and lightning trailed after it. 'Ride,' he said.

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07:10:50

DC DRILLING STATION, GRID REF. G6

The platform was the highest point on the drilling station, slightly higher than the top of the canyon, and crowded with fuel containers, communication arrays and marker lights. The lights surrounded the section of the platform that had been set aside as a landing pad for visiting aerial transports. The structure creaked in the wind, and a fine dusting of snow covered everything. It was the obvious point of attack, and Khajog had decided to set his ambush there.

White Scars moved to and fro across the platform, shifting heavy containers and equipment to create killing fields. The orks would come from above, but by denying them room to spread out, the defenders would force them to approach in small, easily containable bunches. As the other Space Marines saw to the defences, Khajog and Selim examined the mooring clamps and thickly bundled plasteel cables that anchored the upper platform in place and kept it from overbalancing the rest of the structure.

The anchors were old, and held together as much by stubbornness as strength. But then, the same could be said for the entire structure. The whole drilling station had been there for so long that it was almost a part of its environment. Khajog studied the ice-caked shapes of the clamps and wires. They were an obvious weak point in the defences. They assumed that the enemy wanted to take the station intact, but orks had a different definition of ‘intact’ than most. There was a possibility that they would simply attempt to tear the station free of the canyon wall and send it toppling onto the ice below. ‘We’ll need to keep one eye here, and one on the sky,’ he said, looking at Selim.

Selim looked about. ‘The snow is getting worse. We’ll need to take visibility into account as well. If the snowfall gets too heavy, we’ll be fighting blind. Remember Agarta? That snowstorm?’

Khajog waved a hand flippantly. ‘It’s the orks who’ll need to worry. They’ll be the ones moving through it. And Agarta wasn’t that bad.’ He looked at his second-in-command. ‘Where are the humans who are supposed to be fighting with us?’

‘Who, the bait, you mean? Hiding somewhere, hopefully,’ Selim said dismissively.

Khajog was about to reply when he heard a bone-deep rumble, followed by the shriek of shattering ice. He moved quickly to the edge of the platform and looked down. ‘There they go,’ he said. The sound had been the dispatch of the immense fuel haulers that had been pressed into duty as transport for the evacuees. Each of the vessels was a bulky wedge of metal hull, with wide cargo decks now filled past capacity with improvised weather-shelters for the mass of evacuees. The rear of each vessel was taken up by a reinforced engine section, and promethium-fuelled flamer batteries lined the outside of the hull, periodically lashing the surrounding ice with tongues of flame. Heavy, rotating cupolas dotted the uppermost deck, and crewmen manning autocannons occupied them. The haulers smashed through the ice as they moved away from the drilling station.

Kanim and the others had already left, heading in the opposite direction. They were most likely already locked in combat with the orks. Khajog seized the hilt of his Tulwar and gripped it tightly. His anger rose, but he quashed it brutally, forcing himself to remain calm. He had been given his orders, and he would follow them.

He turned as a squeal of gears signalled the arrival of the heavy industrial lift that provided transport between platforms. The lift gate was pulled aside, revealing Mykel and the workers who were staying behind to act as bait. She was clad in an old uniform, its colours faded to a dull iron-grey, and a battered set of carapace armour. Khajog wondered where she had got it, and what she had been, before she had come to the drilling station.

‘We’re ready. Where do you want us?’ Mykel asked, as she led her men out of the lift. There were close to fifty of them, which was barely a mouthful where orks were concerned, Khajog thought. They were equipped with standard-issue lasguns and flak armour, but that was as far as their

resemblance to the soldiers of the Imperial Guard went. The men and women who had elected to stay behind were a motley crew, clad in overalls and environment suits. Most were volunteers, but some had been culled from the station's brig, offered freedom in exchange for defending the platform. Khajog looked them over disparagingly. 'This is what you expect to use to defend this place? I have seen more ferocious jackals,' he said. 'They will run when the orks arrive.'

'They'll do the job,' Mykel said, not looking at him.

Khajog loomed over her, but he could tell that she didn't fear him. That lack of concern puzzled him. 'How can you be sure?' he asked, more politely than he'd intended.

'Because they're more scared of me than the orks,' she said, smiling nastily. Unlike her crew, she carried a heavy combat shotgun. 'You don't like us much, do you?' she asked, after a moment.

'I feel nothing for you either way,' he said. He looked down at her. 'You should not be here. This is our task, our glory, not yours. The field of battle is no fit place for your sort.'

'Your Khan doesn't seem to feel the same way,' she said. She didn't quite meet his gaze, but his estimation of her courage climbed several notches. Humans could be brave, he knew that. But he rarely saw it. And anything that knew fear was prey.

'Suboden Khan is wise in the ways of war, but he seeks to build cages around the enemy. That is not our way. It is not… right, that we should be forced to fight so,' he said plainly, sweeping out an arm to indicate their surroundings. 'We do not defend, we attack. We do not wait, we pounce. We do not stand, we charge. Our ways are the ways of the storm and the wind, not the tortoise.' Which was untrue, no matter how much he might wish otherwise. Tortoise was a tried and tested stratagem of the ordu, as valued as that of Eagle and Serpent. But he didn't have to like it.

Mykel grunted, but said nothing. He gazed at her for a moment, trying to formulate the question he wanted to ask. It was hard, trying to come up with the words in Gothic. Khorchin was the proper language for such conversations, where meaning could be layered and parsed to its fullest extent. Gothic felt like mud on his tongue – it was so stolid and slow, and it made his thoughts ache. 'Why did you stay?' he asked, finally.

Mykel glanced at him, her eyes narrowed. 'Why wouldn't I?'

Khajog gave an exasperated sigh. ‘Why does this place matter?’ He gestured. ‘Why die to defend metal and machinery? I do not understand.’ He made a fist. ‘If you had refused, Suboden would not have forced you to stay. Others might have, perhaps. But the way of chains and cages has never been ours. All men must follow their own destiny.’

‘This station is a vital–’ she began. He cut her off.

‘No. It is nothing that cannot be rebuilt. It is just a place. It is not holy, or sacred.’ He hesitated. He peered at her. ‘Unless it is.’

That was always a possibility. The Mechanicum had odd ideas about the sacred and the profane, and it wasn’t unheard of for it to filter down to those they worked beside.

Mykel snorted. ‘No, not even the cogboys think that.’ She scrubbed her face with her hands, letting the shotgun dangle from its strap. ‘It’s home. It’s… the place where we matter. The only place, really. You understand that?’

‘No,’ he said.

‘Yeah, me neither,’ she said. ‘Don’t you have any place you’d die to defend?’

‘Does here count?’

‘No,’ she said.

Khajog frowned and spat. The acidic saliva burned through the metal at their feet, vanishing into the gloom below. ‘We are the centre of the storm. Where we go, is where we are meant to be. Where we set our lodge poles is home, until we uproot them and ride out.’

‘Some of us ain’t that lucky,’ Mykel said. ‘Some of us can’t just ride out.’ She looked down at the hole his spittle had burned in the floor. ‘Some of us have to stay where we’re sent, and fix what gets broken.’

Khajog shook his head, perplexed. He didn’t understand. He thought perhaps Kanim might, and Suboden, but comprehension slipped through his grasp like sand, and he dismissed the attempt with an irritated flick of his chin. He was about to reply when he heard the explosion. The drilling station shuddered, and ice fell from the cliff face to smash down on the lower platforms.

A grin split his seamed, weather-beaten features. ‘Ha!’

‘What is it?’ Mykel asked. ‘Is the ice breaking up?’

‘No, the orks are coming,’ Khajog said. He threw up his hands and tossed

back his head, unleashing a wild, ululating cry. ‘Brothers, ready yourselves! Death comes fast, and we must ready ourselves to provide his feast!’

WESTERN BOTTLENECK, GRID REF. G4

The White Scars rode, the orks followed and death pursued them both.

The orks could not resist a fleeing enemy, Kanim knew. It was not in them to resist that bloodthirsty instinct, just as they could not stop themselves from fleeing when the tide turned against them and their numbers were thinned. That was the difference between predator and prey, between man and ork. Where their enemy fled, the orks would follow, driven as much by instinct as desire. That was the soul of the ork, and it was that soul which Suboden had studied and exploited in the weeks and days since the Tulwar Brotherhood had come to Armageddon.

That was why they had raced across the white emptiness of the Deadlands, drawing the orks after them again and again, pulling them inexorably into a trap that was built of decisions and choices. They had met the orks again and again, avoiding open battle, bloodying them just enough to keep their interest.

The orks pursued them into the bottleneck. Kanim hunched over the front of his bike, murmuring encouragement to its machine-spirit. His brothers spread out around him, some occasionally firing their bolters over their shoulders at those orks who drew too close. They rode the narrow route as swiftly as they dared. The ice was thinner here, and the water beneath deeper. That was why it had been chosen. Frost billowed beneath his wheels as he rode, jinking one way and then the next to avoid enemy fire. The air quivered as the guns of the orks opened up behind him, puncturing the ice and the canyon walls. For the orks, the sound of guns was as music. They revelled in the noise, as a tiger of the high reaches might draw courage from the echoes of its roar.

Kanim began to sing. Those White Scars closest to him took up the song, and soon the vox crackled with the voices of all. It was at once a death-song and a song of celebration. It wove around the crack of gunfire and the breaking ice and achieved a harmony that no human composer could hope to emulate. It was the song of war, and only the White Scars knew the secret

to the singing of it. The words, which had been ancient before the coming of the Khan, burst from his throat in a rolling, rising hymn. The riders of the plains had sung that song as the cities burned and the lightning struck. They had sung that song to welcome the Khan-of-Khans and to greet the Emperor of Mankind.

The first explosion was a surprise, even though he had known it was coming. The song was cut short, as a newer, more insistent sound washed over them, subsuming all other noises into itself. Despite their best efforts, they had barely cleared the first hurdle, Kanim knew. The icy face of the canyon walls ruptured with a roar that set his bones to trembling in their envelope of meat and muscle. A cloud of frost rose up as ice struck ice, and the surface beneath his wheels bucked and twisted upwards. The bike hurtled through the air and crashed down hard, jolting him in his seat as he slewed sideways. ‘Ride,’ he roared out, as if his voice could lend speed to the wheels of his brothers. ‘Ride, and do not look back.’

The White Scars rolled on, dodging the serpentine cracks that pursued them with as much tenacity as the orks who scrambled in their wake. The greenskins did not yet understand their peril, though Kanim fancied that when the second explosion occurred just ahead of them, the smarter ones finally grasped the edges of the situation. A second cloud of frost, larger than the first, swept towards the White Scars, who pierced it without slowing. To slow down now meant death. Speed was their weapon now.

He leaned left as a chunk of ice larger than him speared down, puncturing the ground and releasing a geyser of freezing water into the air. He jinked back the other way as another fang of ice joined the first. The air was thick with snow and hoarfrost, and even with the sensors built into his helmet he could barely see where he was going.

Kanim could hear the screams of the orks as he rode. They were caught between the water and the ice. Some few would survive the explosions, but not all, not enough to do anything but retreat back the way they’d come. That was the idea, anyway. But plans rarely survived contact with the enemy, especially an enemy like orks. The ork was a spanner in the works of any strategy, no matter how well crafted. There was no way to tell how they would react, until they did.

The ice cracked beneath his wheels, and he whispered a quick prayer to the spirits as he gunned the engine and rode up the sudden incline, hurtling

the breach and the snapping embrace of the dark waters. More cracks appeared as his wheels touched down. Another explosion ahead, reducing the canyon walls to a storm of ice and rock. He saw a Space Marine torn from his saddle by a whirling chunk of debris, and another crushed by the falling ice, and he cursed. They were cutting it too fine, and the orks were still coming. At this rate, they would speed past the final hurdle.

A huge shard of ice, larger than the others, smashed down behind him, and exploded as an ork vehicle crashed through it. The vehicle was larger than any of the others he'd seen, and looked more like a mobile fortress than a transport. A spike-studded roller was mounted on the front, and the gun-towers that jutted from its chassis spat death in all directions. Smaller vehicles were using its bulk as cover, when they weren't being crushed beneath it as it slid across the ice on an improvised sledge, powered by a fire-belching rocket booster. It smashed through sheets of falling ice without pause, its armoured hull seemingly impenetrable. White Scars fired at it as they rode, but the bolter fire had no more effect than the ice.

As it bore down on him, Kanim realised that it wasn't likely to stop. Even the explosives placed at the exit to the bottleneck wouldn't slow it down. And there was simply no telling how many orks sheltered within its belly. He leaned to the side, and shot across the rolling engine's path. He heard the cries of his brothers on the vox, and barked a single word, 'No.' He ramped up a shattered chunk of ice and hurtled towards the gigantic vehicle. 'This prey is mine,' he growled. He hefted his staff and lightning crackled along its length. He could feel the spirits pulling at him, urging him to release the power that was building within his mind and soul.

It was like a fire in his gut, and the ice began to melt beneath his wheels. The snow bunched and pounced about him, keeping pace. He aimed his front wheel towards the roller and urged the bike's engine to greater speed. His wheels caught the roller and he surged upwards. As he cleared the roller, he unleashed the lightning that howled for release within him, enveloping the front compartment of the ork vehicle in a wave of crackling destruction.

Metal was pulverised and torn from the hull, creating an impromptu path for Kanim's bike as it completed its arc of travel. He slammed down, and felt the impact in every bone and muscle. His bike groaned beneath him, pushed to the limit of its strength, but still yearning to run. His wheels

skidded slightly on the oily, charred metal. Crumpled bodies lay everywhere, wreathed in smoke. The great leviathan of metal shuddered and shook, but it continued to speed forward. It took more than killing the crew to stop an ork vehicle. But headless, it would be easy to lead to its doom.

As Kanim twisted the bike back around, his wheels screeching and throwing up smoke, the gun towers opened up. He raced forward, back the way he'd come, trying to stir the power within him to life once more. As his bike caught the air again, he caressed the triggers of the bolters mounted on the front, and emptied the guns into the ice below as he descended.

The ice cracked and burst. It shuddered beneath him as he landed and the cracks spread wide and fast as the weight of the ork engine bore down on it. There was a sound like the roar of some dying leviathan, and an explosion of freezing water as the great vehicle sank roller-first beneath the ice, its boosters still firing.

Kanim did not stay to witness its final moments. He felt hollowed out and drained and wanted nothing more than to rest. But he had ridden longer hunts than this, and there would only be rest at the end, after their prey had been caught and gutted. He hunched forwards and raced away, the orks still in pursuit.

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07:11:30

DC DRILLING STATION, GRID REF. G6

‘There’s the drilling station,’ Ariq said, pointing over Sartaq’s shoulder. Around them, the ork flyer they had stolen shuddered as if it were about to tear itself apart hurtling through the air.

‘Yes, good spotting that,’ Sartaq muttered. ‘I might have missed it otherwise.’ He glanced back. ‘Brace for impact.’

‘Impact?’

Sartaq shrugged. ‘It’s not like I know how to land this thing.’

‘It’s not like you’ll get the chance – the orks look like they’ve decided to take it back!’ Yunan yelped, bracing himself in the compartment hatch. Ariq turned and saw, through the ruptured hull of the rear section, a typhoon of rocket-propelled orks hurtling towards them. Far more than Rukn could gun down, or that they could fight off.

‘Well, if we’re going to crash, we may as well have some fun doing it,’ Ariq said. He dropped his fist on Sartaq’s shoulder. ‘Try and get us down in one piece, brother.’

‘No promises,’ Sartaq grunted.

‘I’m taking your bolter,’ Ariq said, hefting Sartaq’s weapon. The knucklebones that hung from the thin strips of dried leather lashed about the barrel clattered as he checked the clip.

‘Don’t lose it. I want it back,’ Sartaq said.

‘No promises,’ Ariq said. He stepped into the rear compartment, weapon ready. Yunan followed him, his Tulwar in one hand and his knife in the other. Rukn pitched the gun he’d been firing out through the ruined hatch and stepped back. He glanced at them and grunted.

‘Suppressing fire, Ariq,’ he said.

‘Of course, sergeant,’ Ariq said. He began to fire, picking his targets with care. The orks were coming too fast for him to do more than pick off the slower ones. He heard the crash of heavy bodies striking the hull, and saw orks hurtle past them, heading towards the drilling station. The closest of the pursuing flyers drew dangerously close, and he saw what could only be boarding ramps extending from the top of the hull. A moment later, there was a sound like a Rhino backfiring and two massive grapples shot from just below the nose of the flyer and smashed into their craft, tearing through the abused hull as if it were parchment.

Ariq threw himself flat as one of the grapples flew past him. Even so, it caught him on the shoulder and rolled him forcefully onto his back. He heard a scream, cut short, and twisted about to see that Yunan had not been as quick. The other scout had been pinned to the bulkhead by the grapple, and blood pulsed from his crushed torso and open mouth. He thrashed for a moment, and then slumped forward over the taut chain of the grapple, his Tulwar slipping from his hand. *Unlucky,* Ariq thought, and immediately felt ashamed.

‘Up, boy, up,’ Rukn roared, dragging Ariq to his feet. ‘The hain come!’ Rukn lunged for the boarding ramp as it slammed down, clambering atop it, blades in hand. Orks charged down the ramp, some losing their footing in their haste to get to grips with their enemy, pitching off the ramp and vanishing with frustrated howls. Ariq snatched up Yunan’s fallen Tulwar and moved to follow Rukn.

Rukn drove his knee into an ork’s belly and pitched the greenskin behind him. Ariq beheaded the xenos with a two-handed blow, and spun to parry an axe-blow. The ork roared and slashed at him as it tried to tug a heavy pistol from the holster strapped to its chest. Ariq blocked the blow and lunged, grabbing the handle of the pistol before the ork could. He twisted it upwards, holster and all, and pulled the trigger. The ork’s head popped like a blister as the slug tore through it. He shoved the body aside and looked for another opponent.

Rukn had made it to the centre of the ramp. It was barely wide enough for one ork to come at him at a time, and the White Scar was making them pay for that oversight. His blade flickered like lightning, trailing dark blood through the rushing air. Nevertheless, some orks made it past him by the

simple expedient of jumping.

Ariq crashed into one of these, driving his forearm into the brute's throat and pitching it backwards before it could gain its footing. Another grappled with him, filling his ear with slobbered curses as it sought to bear him backwards. He slid his sword up between them and the blade hammered through the ork's bottom jaw and into its brain. Its arms tightened as the life went out of its eyes, and he toppled backwards, born down by its weight.

Rukn was slowly being forced backwards by the orks, who piled towards him, heedless of the blade that had already claimed so many of their fellows. Ariq suspected that was less to do with eagerness than the fact that the aircraft had started to tilt downwards. He could hear the engines struggling. They were going down.

DC DRILLING STATION, GRID REF. G6

The air above the platform was split by the whine of barbaric turbines. Squat, heavy shapes tumbled downwards, bellowing savagely as they blasted away at the defenders with heavy pistols. Lasguns snapped in response.

Out of sight, beneath the support struts, Khajog smiled, gauging the distance and rate of the orks' descent. 'They've taken the bait,' Selim said, from where he crouched nearby.

'They're orks,' another White Scar muttered.

Khajog said nothing. He watched the orks descend, and held his hand up. His men raised their bolters. While the bolter drill was not a commonly employed tool amongst the White Scars given their preferred method of war, it was a tool nonetheless, and one that every warrior of the Chapter had mastered. As the orks would soon discover to their detriment, if Khajog had anything to say about it.

'Now,' he said, dropping his hand.

Selim and the others rose and, as one, their bolters thundered. Bolter fire perforated the air, punching through green knobbly flesh, patchwork armour and fuel tanks with ease. Orks fell from the sky, landing with all the grace of crippled frogs. One struck the platform hard enough to pulverise its bones, bounced, and spun like a child's toy towards a storage tank, its

makeshift jump pack venting flames. It struck the reinforced structure hard enough to dent it, and sagged there, its jump pack still firing periodically.

The White Scars continued to fire, moving forward, out into the open, as they did so. Some orks had survived the fusillade and made it to the platform, and Khajog drew his Tulwar as they barrelled towards the Space Marines, roaring in excitement. He laughed and flowed across the platform to meet them. ‘Come, come and greet death,’ he shouted. The orks replied in kind, and then he was among them, his Tulwar painting the frosty air with their blood. A wide, notched blade struck his chest-plate and rebounded and he spun, his Tulwar chopping into the ork’s belly. He let his momentum carry him around, and his blade slid free of the ork, trailing slippery lengths of intestine as it sought new prey.

He slapped aside the barrel of a pistol and booted its wielder in the chest, knocking the ork backwards into its fellows. An axe sank into his shoulder-plate, yanking him off balance. The platform was slippery with alien blood, and his feet skidded. The ork with the axe gave a yellow grin and forced him down, using its weapon as a lever. Khajog spat a curse and lashed out at the brute. The ork tore its weapon free and scrambled back. It bellowed something in its own tongue, and swung a two-handed blow at him. Khajog managed to interpose his Tulwar, but only just. The force of the blow picked him up off his feet and sent him flying to the ground.

The ork raced towards him, axe raised. Then a weapon boomed and the beast was spun around. A second shot followed the first, sending the ork backwards. Mykel strode forwards, the shotgun smoking in her hands. The ork rose with a roar and lurched towards her. Mykel blocked the axe-blow with her shotgun, but the force of the strike knocked her sprawling. Khajog tackled the ork while it was distracted, his hands seizing its chin and scalp. He gave a vicious twist, and the ork’s thick neck splintered with an audible crackle. He let the body fall, and turned to Mykel. ‘Maybe you’re not so useless after all,’ he said.

‘Good effort,’ Mykel grunted as she levered herself up. ‘Keep trying and maybe one day you’ll know how to make an actual apology.’ She snatched up her fallen weapon.

Khajog retrieved his Tulwar and gave it a desultory spin. ‘I believe that I am proficient enough,’ he said.

Mykel laughed. Khajog grinned and looked around. Mykel’s workers and

his own warriors were putting paid to the few orks who still lived. Selim lifted a brace of decapitated heads and gave vent to an ululating call.

Khajog raised his blade in reply. Then he looked at Mykel. ‘It would be best to see to your men. There will be more orks. This battle is not over yet,’ he began. Before he could continue, he heard Selim yell a warning, and he looked up. His eyes widened as he took in the shapes that plummeted down towards the landing pad like arrows fired from a bow.

Khajog whirled and scooped Mykel up, cradling her as the force of the impact caused the entire drilling station to shift and groan. Smoke flooded the platform, and fire as well, as metal screamed and buckled. The landing area crumpled and collapsed in on itself, crashing down onto the next platform. Loose cables whipsawed through the air wildly, spitting sparks. Heavy containers were ruptured, and unprocessed oil splashed across the platform, sweeping many of Mykel’s men off their feet, and carrying some over the edge of the platform to their deaths. Khajog held her close and shielded her from the explosion with his body as the oil and flames washed over him, scorching his armour and causing the white paint to bubble and peel.

‘Are you unharmed?’ he asked, looking down at her soot-blackened features. She coughed and nodded. He put her down carefully and turned. Selim and the others moved towards him through the curling flames. Khajog signalled to them and looked back at Mykel. ‘Gather your men and fall back. This platform is no place for humans now.’

‘We’re not leaving,’ she coughed.

He shook his head. ‘I did not say you were leaving. I said fall back. Secondary defensive positions,’ he said. ‘You have done your part, woman. You did not run. I… was wrong.’ He hesitated, and then grinned. ‘See, I can apologise. Go, this is our sort of battle now. Only eagles may soar over a field of fire and blood.’

She looked at him for a moment. Then, with a brisk nod, she turned and scrambled towards the lift, yelling orders as she ran. The surviving workers followed her, moving quickly as the air became thick with smoke and the oil began to freeze into black ice. Selim hurried towards him, his power armour blackened and filthy. ‘I told you they would run,’ he barked.

‘They are not running, Selim. They are getting out of our way,’ Khajog said, swatting his brother’s shoulder-plate with the flat of his Tulwar. He

gestured with the blade towards the wreckage. ‘Those were ork vessels, or I’m a grass-eater. Gather the others. It is time to hunt.’

WESTERN BOTTLENECK, GRID REF. G5

The force of the final explosion caught Kanim’s bike and sent it flipping through the air like a child’s toy. He crashed to the ground, and only narrowly managed to avoid being crushed. He wasn’t the only one to have been flung about so, and he saw white-armoured forms struggling to their feet all about him, as their luckier brethren raced back towards them. A wall of frost billowed out of the bottleneck and rolled over them. Kanim used his staff to haul himself to his feet and made his way to his bike.

It lay on its side, smashed and fragile-looking, one wheel still spinning. It looked sad, and he felt a pang of hurt at the state of it. It was not a relic of the Chapter, not as such, but it was as much a tool of the Emperor as he was, and as deserving of respect. He placed a hand on its crumpled chassis and murmured a soft prayer that whatever spirit inhabited its shell would find its way back to the rolling plains of Chogoris, until the day and hour it was called forth again to serve as a steed to a warrior of the ordu.

He stood and looked towards the distant shape of the drilling station. A column of smoke rose from it, and he could hear the sound of battle. For better or worse, the trap had been sprung, and Suboden would soon meet his fate, either way. Kanim looked up. Contrails of smoke marked the sky. The trail of the beast. It was still dangerous, but its teeth had been blunted. Now it was all up to the others.

The air trembled with the sound of engines. Some orks had made it through the ice, as he’d known they would. He smiled. It was good that they were so persistent. He feared that he would have been disappointed otherwise.

He lifted his staff. ‘Do you hear them, brothers?’ he asked into the vox. ‘Do you smell their blood on the air? Do you taste it on your tongues?’

He turned. ‘We have ridden hard and fast, and done as our Khan commanded. And now we receive our reward, brothers,’ he continued. ‘We have bloodied them. We have gutted them, and burned them and drowned them, and they still come, brothers. And we would not have it any other

way, eh?’ Kanim glanced at the gathered White Scars. ‘Let your steeds rest, brothers – the time for riding is over. Now is the time to stand. We have bought our brothers their moment. Now we must buy them time to seize it.’

The thrum of engines grew louder. It was not as loud as it had been. He wondered how many of them had survived. Enough to take the drilling station, if they got past Kanim and his riders. The explosives had only ever been meant to delay and distract the main bulk of the horde. But they hadn’t been enough. They had underestimated the strength of the greenskins. Or perhaps it was just as he had said – this moment was a gift. A last taste of a beloved enemy’s blood before the end. Kanim looked up again, and inhaled deeply. ‘Yes, I hear you,’ he murmured to the spirits. ‘Go, see that fate finds its way,’ he said, and sent them off flying and tumbling through the air, on the scent of converging destinies. He felt a moment of loneliness, as the silence filled his head. Then he released the breath he’d been holding and spun his staff.

Mustering the last of his strength, he stretched his mind out and grasped the ice. He slammed the end of his staff down, and twisted it as if it were a spear and the ice were his prey. The air filled with great cracklings and he lifted his staff, pulling the ice with it, drawing it up. Humps of ice rose, forming improvised natural barricades. ‘Here we stand, brothers. And the spirits of this place stand with us.’ Kanim laid his staff over his shoulder and set his foot on the ice. Around him, the White Scars took up their positions, ready to unleash a storm of bolter fire on the approaching orks.

As the wobbling shapes of the first of the surviving ork vehicles pierced the cloud of frost and shot towards them, Kanim smiled. ‘Here we stand,’ he said again, ‘and here they come.’

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07:11:45

DC DRILLING STATION, GRID REF. G6

Khajog led Selim and the others into the smoke and fire, hunting orks. There was no telling how many had survived the crash. The greenskins were durable, built as they were for war, but even they had their limits, as evidenced by the profusion of twisted, charred xenos carcasses that littered the platform. Occasionally, an ork would burst from the oil-fed flames with its muscular limbs wreathed in fire. It would charge towards the White Scars, singing the coarse war-songs of its people, and be summarily gunned down.

‘This is fun, but shouldn’t we do something about them?’ Selim asked, after the fifth such incident. He gestured. Khajog looked up. Overhead, more looted ork aircraft circled like buzzards, descending on the drilling station with dangerous speed.

‘Kichak, Muktar, take them out,’ Khajog snarled, motioning to two of his men.

Muktar hefted a missile launcher and gave a laugh. ‘Happily,’ he said. He punched Kichak in the shoulder. ‘Come brother, we have birds to pluck.’ He sprinted towards one of the communication towers. Kichak followed him more sedately.

Selim watched them go. ‘As soon as the smoke clears, we’ll be knee-deep in orks,’ he said. He looked up. ‘Or sooner, as the case may be.’

Khajog followed his gaze and saw the tumbling shapes of ork assault troops falling through the swirling snow towards them, bellowing in eagerness. They leapt from the descending aircraft in an undisciplined horde, undeterred by either the weather or the flames.

Their cries were taken up by throats closer to the ground. On one of the wrecked flyers, a gun port opened up, spraying the area immediately in front of it with bullets. White Scars dived for cover. Even trapped in fiery wreckage, the orks refused to die with their blades unbloodied.

Khajog laughed. ‘They truly are a gift, eh Selim?’

‘One I would like to return,’ Selim said sourly. He had rolled behind a chunk of jagged metal that stood upright where it had stabbed into the platform. He rolled onto his belly and fired, stitching the gun port and momentarily distracting the gunner. Another White Scar surged to his feet and sprang onto the wreckage, a grenade in hand. He tossed the grenade through the gun slit and leapt away. An explosion ripped through the already-burning hulk and the gun fell silent.

A moment later, the hatch of the wrecked flyer was torn free of its hinges and sent spinning away from the burning hulk by a brutal kick. A massive ork squeezed out of the opening, its one good eye blazing with barbaric excitement. Its other eye was a mangled mess, weeping blood, but the ork didn’t seem unduly bothered. Chunks of shrapnel had pierced its head and arms and its tattered clothing smouldered, but it threw back its head and gave vent to a glutinous laugh. It slapped its chest with its hands, smothering the flames that crawled across it, and then snatched a large axe from where it hung on its harness. The ork looked about him, bestial features twisted in an approximation of a smile. Then, with a bone-rattling roar, it launched itself at the Space Marines.

Before the stunned White Scars could react, the axe licked out with deadly accuracy. It caught the closest, a warrior named Boorchu, in the torso and tore him open, belt to brow, even as he was hurled into the air by the force of the blow. The ork was fast, and it reversed the axe in order to remove the head of a second warrior, Chiledu. Khajog lunged forward, and the ork spread its arms as it caught sight of him, bellowing something in its own unruly tongue. He took the gesture as an invitation, and opened a bloody wound in the beast’s chest.

But his blow had brought him too close, and the ork’s hand snapped out. Green fingers obscured his vision as his head was enveloped in the brute’s fist. Before he could even make the attempt to free himself, he was wrenched up into the air and then slammed down hard enough to crumple the surface of the platform. The internal systems of his power armour

experienced a momentary hiccup and the lenses of his eyepieces went dark. He felt himself hauled back up. His systems righted themselves just in time for him to watch the platform speeding up towards him once more.

The ork released him, and gave another roar of laughter. It snarled out something in its heathen tongue and Khajog felt the weight of its foot on the back of his neck. A surge of anger speared through him and he forced himself up onto his hands and knees, dislodging the creature. Surprised, it kicked him in the chest, sending him rolling. As he righted himself, he caught sight of his Tulwar, lying where he'd dropped it. He threw himself towards it, drawing his bolt pistol as he lunged.

Sliding through the frozen sludge, he fired at the brute as it charged towards him. He focused his shots on its knees and ankles. One of his shots struck home, and the ork lurched sideways with a howl. More large orks had fought their way free of the wreckage. They were the lords of their kind, the champions of their savage tribe, and where they went, their lord wouldn't be far behind. For the first time, Khajog began to think that there might be something to Suboden's plan.

Even as the orks launched themselves at the White Scars, their airborne fellows descended, firing their weapons wildly. Khajog reached for the hilt of his sword, but a grip on his ankle prevented him from reacquiring it. He rolled over, and saw the wounded ork hauling itself towards him. He swung his bolt pistol up and fired until it clicked dry. The ork slumped, its skull and chest pulped into smoking ruin. Khajog kicked it off and made to get to his feet. But something struck him as he levered himself up. Several more blows followed, each one putting a small crater in the white ceramite surface of his power amour.

Wheezing, he saw a number of heavily muscled orks approaching. The one in the lead clutched a heavy, double-barrelled amalgamation of weaponry that still smoked from the shots it had recently unleashed. Khajog picked himself up as the other orks charged forward, roaring with glee. He caught the blade of the first between his palms and drove his foot into the brute's knee, crushing it. The ork sagged and he wrenched the blade from its grasp; as it fell, he kicked it in the head, crushing its skull, and brought his borrowed blade down on the shoulder of the next to reach him. The ork grabbed his arm as he tried to pull his blade free and he smashed its leering features with his fist again and again, until his arm was wet with gore to the

elbow. He shoved the body aside and turned, weaponless, to meet the charge of his next opponent, all the while keeping a wary eye on the gun-toting ork who watched the proceedings with a grimly amused air.

That amusement turned to confusion as the ork dropped its weapon and reached up to touch the weeping gash that had suddenly opened up on its throat. Khajog quickly snapped the neck of the ork he'd been grappling with as the other toppled over onto its face with a wet splat. 'I was wondering when you'd get here, old man,' Khajog said, turning to retrieve his Tulwar. 'Where are your pups?'

Rukn cleaned the blood off his knife and sniffed. The scout sergeant looked like death warmed over – his armour was blasted and scorched, and his fatigues were blackened and torn. Blood streaked his bare arms and burns dotted his grizzled features. 'Cleaning up your mess,' Rukn croaked.

Khajog looked past him and saw the scout called Ariq slicing the scalp from an ork. Like Rukn, Ariq looked much the worse for wear.

'Is he the only survivor?' Khajog asked quietly.

'Lucky,' Rukn said, approvingly.

'Lucky is good,' Khajog said.

'Khajog!'

The shout caused Khajog to whirl. He saw Selim and the others falling back from the wreckage, emptying their bolters into a massive shape that heaved itself into view to the accompaniment of the sound of tearing metal and gunfire. He glanced at Rukn, who said, 'We brought you a gift. Did I forget to mention that?'

'Suboden Khan will thank you,' Khajog said from between clenched teeth.

A heavy gun roared, and slugs perforated the platform. The massive shape was an ork, but one larger than any ork he'd ever seen. It roared as it kicked and flailed its way free of the wreckage it had been trapped in, thrusting itself towards Khajog's fellow White Scars. It smashed aside its fellows in its progress, and he could see that it was clad in a barbaric battle-suit that looked as if it had been cobbled together from loose hull plates and rivets. A colossal pair of pincers clacked at the end of one arm, and a whirring assault cannon dominated the other, multiple feed-belts of ammunition flapping about it.

The ork was even larger than its champions, and its brawny frame was squeezed into an exoskeleton of armour plates, wheezing pistons and

primitive smokestacks that belched flame with every twitch of the beast's swollen musculature. To Khajog, it looked as if the exoskeleton was less armour than support for the beast's weight, which caused the platform to tremble with every step. He suspected that the beast's apparent fury was due not to finding itself surrounded by enemies, but because its warriors had engaged them first. As he watched, it caught one of them by the head, and easily snipped the greenskin's skull from its shoulders.

And as if that casual act of brutality had been a signal, the orks attacked anew, hurling themselves into battle with a growl of rockets and a mighty roar.

Ariq whipped around, driving the blade of his knife into the side of the ork's head. He hauled the dying xenos around, using its body for cover as its more enthusiastic companions fired at him from above, balancing on tongues of flame. Those orks who were strapped to rockets hurtled here and there across the platform, racing towards one enemy and then the next, as if unable to decide who to target. Other greenskins, either more sensible, or simply out of fuel, charged across the field of wreckage towards the White Scars, who fell back in good order at Khajog's roared command.

Ariq shoved the dead ork aside and fired the bolt pistol he'd recovered from Sartaq's body. The other scout had died on impact, but he'd managed to get them down as he'd promised. Ariq felt no sadness now, as he had for the others, only a savage joy at his own survival. Grief had been burned out of him, and he knew that he would sing for the spirits of his brothers when this day was done. But now was for taking the scalps of the enemy. He fired again and again, dropping orks as they charged.

He started as a heavy grip fell on his aching shoulder. Rukn pulled him back. 'Time to go, boy. Fall back with the others.'

'There's still orks to kill,' Ariq protested.

'There's always more orks to kill. That's the beauty of them,' a White Scar snarled, as he backed towards them, his bolter bucking in his hands. 'Fall back, boy, or die here. Just don't get in the way.' The White Scar turned towards them. The wolf fangs set into the grille of his helmet made it seem as if he were baring his teeth at them. 'You as well, old man. Suboden Khan would have our topknots if you fell here.'

'He'll have yours one day regardless, Selim,' Rukn grunted, firing his own

weapon at the charging orks. Selim gave a caw of laughter and turned back to the enemy as more greenskins erupted out of the smoke still roiling across the platform. Suddenly, however, Selim's laughter was cut short as an enormous pair of pincers split the smoke and snapped shut on his torso with a horrible, wet sound. Power armour crumpled like paper, and the flesh within gave way with barely a struggle. Selim's body flopped at a wrong angle before it was flung aside by the ork warboss.

The massive assault cannon appeared next, piercing the smoke and snow like the prow of a ship, and it gave a whine as it spat death. White Scars jittered as they were caught by the storm of fire. The cannon swung around, homing in on Ariq. Rukn caught him and threw them both aside. The whirring lance of death swept over them and sliced through a number of cables. One of the ancient anchors that held the platform in place exploded into white hot shards. The platform shifted in response. The cut wires whipped about as the platform settled, and an unpleasant expression crossed the ork's face.

Ariq saw the creature's lip curl upwards above the rusty tips of its mechanical lower jaw. The creature bellowed something, and a number of its warriors hurried for the other anchors, hacking and shooting at them with as much pleasure as they had shown in fighting the White Scars.

'No,' Khajog roared from behind Ariq as the platform began to twitch and tremble beneath their feet. Before anyone could stop him, the champion had bounded towards the warboss. There was a sound like metal striking stone, and Khajog's Tulwar rebounded off the brute's armour. The warboss spun and its pincers made to close about the White Scar. Khajog dropped his blade and caught the pincers, forcing them to remain open.

For a moment, the only sound was the hissing of cut wires and the sound of straining servos as Khajog fought the inexorable pressure of the claw. The warboss leaned over him, its eyes bulging in frustration as it slowly forced its claw closer to the champion's head. Then Ariq saw Rukn dart forward. As the scout sergeant caught the champion about the middle and wrenched him out of danger, Ariq emptied his weapon at the warboss, trying to draw its attention from Khajog and Rukn as they scrambled back towards him.

'Fool,' Rukn snarled, slapping Khajog in a gesture that Ariq found painfully familiar. 'What were you doing?'

‘It’s aiming for the anchor-cables,’ Khajog snarled, shoving himself to his feet. Blood spattered his gorget, and he clutched at his midsection with a hiss of agony as if his efforts had torn something inside himself. ‘It intends to destroy this place.’

The ork warboss gave a roar of bestial laughter and fired again, gunning down those of its own warriors who were not swift enough to get out of the line of fire. The whirring assault cannon chewed ice and metal alike.

‘It’s mad,’ Ariq said, reloading his bolt pistol. The other White Scars had sought cover, and were trading fire with those orks not occupied in hacking through the platform anchors. ‘It’ll kill us all.’

‘Even now, you still do not understand them,’ Rukn said, looking at him. ‘It always intended to destroy this place. That is why it came. It is their nature. It cannot resist.’

‘We have to stop it,’ Ariq said.

‘We will,’ Khajog said.

‘No,’ Rukn said. He pointed. ‘They will.’

The sound of jump packs suddenly split the air. Assault marines streaked through the smoke and snow like pale comets, hurtling down onto the enemy like hunting falcons. Orks lost limbs and heads to their blades where they passed. Those orks who could hurtled themselves skywards, and the warriors of the Star Hunt followed them. Blood rained down, mingling with the snow. And not only blood. A familiar, white-armoured shape dropped down, landing with a heavy clang. The shape stood, and the eyes of the beast locked with those of the newcomer. The ork warboss snarled.

‘Yes, here I am, beast,’ Suboden Khan roared in reply. ‘Here I am, and here is your doom, come around at last!’

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07:12:00

Torag the Uquillian led his flying warriors in song as they butchered the greenskins without hesitation. Khajog watched enviously as the assault marines crashed again and again into the enemy, striking hard and speeding away before the orks could recover.

The Uquillian made a hard, rolling midair turn and swept past the enormous bulk of the warboss, striking out at it, stinging it again and again as it sought to catch him. More assault marines joined their commander and surrounded the beast, darting in to draw blood and skidding back to avoid its blows or the shot from its cannon. Then, all at once, they streaked skywards, leaving the warboss watching their departure in befuddlement.

The ork realised its danger almost too late, as Suboden plunged towards it. The ork turned as the shriek of the jump pack's turbines pierced the red haze that occupied its skull. Its power claw narrowly missed the Khan as he rolled beneath it, and his power-lance shot forward to pierce the beast's armour with a wet sound. The ork reeled and Suboden thrust himself away from it, looping through the air like a hawk.

Khajog made to attack while it was distracted, but Rukn stopped him. 'No. The hunt is done. Now is only the kill. And the honour of that kill is Suboden Khan's. Watch. Learn,' he said, blood dripping down his beard.

Suboden darted about the ork warboss like a falcon attacking a bear, and the ork followed him, roaring and cursing in its own foul tongue. The Khan sped backwards, out of reach, landed with a dull thump, and spun his lance artfully. The haft had been shortened, and was decorated with bands of ivory and gold. Still spinning the blade, Suboden began to move. And as he

moved, he spoke, softly at first, then more loudly. The ork watched him, its piggy eyes seemingly unable to look away from the glittering edge of the power-lance.

'I was afraid, at first, that you would not come, my friend.' The blade of the power-lance hissed as the last of the blood on the blade evaporated. 'But I should trust the wisdom of the spirits.' He fell into a crouch, the lance extended before him. 'They spoke of death, and here you are, and here I am. Death, ork, spreads its wings over us. It races from the dark, sweeping towards us, seeking to carry one of us off. Come,' Suboden said, rotating the blade slowly. 'Come! Hurry, ork, hurry! Death flies fast, and we must be faster! Show me your teeth, beast, let me see your fear, let your blood ride the curve of this blade. Come – hurry! Hurry! Hurry!' he roared.

Startled, the ork gave vent to a roar of its own. The immense belt-fed gun on its arm swung up and it blazed away, but Suboden was already moving. His jump pack carried him smoothly forward. He spiralled through the air, weapon extended. The ork jerked aside and the blade carved a spark-laden path across its chest. Its power claw snapped shut on Suboden, crushing his jump pack, but he continued with his thrust, piercing the ork's throat. The beast hurled the Khan aside and reeled back, Suboden's power-glaive standing upright in its throat. It gurgled and pawed ineffectually at the blade.

Suboden rolled to his feet and spat blood. Khajog could see that his armour was crushed and scorched where the claw had touched it just as his own had been, but the Khan did not hesitate. He drew his Tulwar and drove forwards, his blade licking out to draw blood wherever it touched.

The ork staggered and fell back. Its claw finally hooked the haft of the glaive and it ripped the weapon free in a spray of gore. It flung the weapon aside and swung its gun up, but too late. Suboden slid past its flailing claw and his boot caught the creature's knee. With a single, sinuous motion, he climbed the ork's barrel torso, and swept his Tulwar out. It sheared through the exoskeleton and bit into green flesh. Suboden's blade continued on through, as the ork smashed him down to the ground. The Khan hit the ground and rolled aside as one great foot slammed down where his head had been. The platform trembled.

Suboden levered himself to his feet with his Tulwar, and readied himself to meet the ork's charge. The creature took a step, then another. Then, a

confused expression crossed its scarred features and its head toppled from its neck. It rolled across the platform and came to rest at Suboden's feet. He met the fading fires of the ork's stare and inclined his head in a brief gesture of, if not respect, then acknowledgement.

The great body fell with a crash. The remaining orks began to flee. Suboden sliced the air with his blade, as the White Scars made to pursue. 'Let them go,' he said. 'A hunter does not eradicate his prey. He merely takes his due.' He set his foot on the warboss's head. 'And we have taken ours in full.'

The battle on the ice had not lasted long. When the first orks had wobbled through the sky, fleeing desperately back the way they'd come, those on the ground decided that they'd had enough. It was a rare thing for orks to flee, but Kanim had been pleased to see the back of them. Now the ice was reforming over the sunken wrecks of xenos vehicles. The snow hid ork bodies, and the orks were fleeing back towards the Tempest Ocean. They would pursue them, in time. But for now, there was gene-seed to be collected and songs to be sung. The White Scars had their rituals for victory as well as defeat, and they would be observed by the survivors.

Kanim limped across the upper platform, leaning on his staff. His armour was scarred and scorched, where it wasn't pockmarked with craters, but he was alive and in one piece, which was more than he could say for the drilling station, which was badly damaged, if still stable. They had prevented the orks from destroying more than a few of the cables, and fighting still continued on the lower platforms – not all of the orks had run. Some had merely gone to ground. They would be hunted down and exterminated before the White Scars left; that was the least they could do, after risking the drilling station and its crew. It was small recompense, Kanim thought, as he stepped over the mangled body of a fallen roustabout. He paused and looked down at the dead man, wondering what spirits had spoken to him in his final moments.

Yielding to some small temptation, he knelt and traced the contours of the dead man's face with his fingers as he spoke a quiet prayer in Khorchin. A warrior who fought and fell beside warriors of the ordu was as deserving of respect as any Khan. 'May your spirit find peace in whatever afterlife awaits you,' he murmured.

He looked up, and saw a wolf-fanged ghost striding through the smoke, hands empty and armour torn. Selim had gone to join the fallen of the Chapter on the ghost-road. He felt little for the fallen Space Marine, brother-White Scar or no. For a moment, he wondered if that were the reason that the spirits had wanted Khajog to stand; Selim had been a bad influence, and without his voice whispering in Khajog's ear, the champion might yet become a Khan worthy of the title.

Kanim dismissed the thought with a twitch of his head. It mattered little now. What was done was done; the path had been taken, and there was no sense in looking back. Best to ride forward, and ride fast, with eyes open to see whatever came.

'Shaman, I am pleased to see that you survived my gamble.'

Kanim turned. Suboden Khan sat on a chunk of wreckage, holding the warboss's head between his hands. 'Was it worth it, then?' the Khan asked, without looking up.

'Only you can answer that, my Khan,' Kanim said. He rose to his feet and strode towards the Khan. He stopped before his commander and looked about. 'The spirits do not share their opinion, after the fact.'

'How convenient,' Suboden grunted. He looked up from his grisly trophy. 'Khajog fought well. He held firm,' he said. 'There may be hope for him yet.'

'Yes,' Kanim said, thinking of what the spirits had shown him. He did not know whether the choice he had made was right, only that it had been made, and the skein of fate had been pulled taut. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, he asked, 'What of Rukn?'

'He made it back in one piece, the old wolf.' Suboden frowned. 'The young warriors in his care were not so lucky, save one.'

'Ariq,' Kanim said, smiling.

'Lucky Ariq,' Suboden said. He turned the ork head towards Kanim. The jaw hung slack and broken, and to Kanim's eye, shockingly unoccupied. 'He took some of the teeth so that he might make a Go set, for the boy. He was short a few. I thought it not inappropriate.'

Kanim laughed. 'No?'

'No,' Suboden said. He set the head down and placed his foot on it. 'It is a good reminder of something someone once told me – luck counts almost as much as skill in battle.'

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IN THE DEPTHS OF HADES

NICK KYME

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Vinyar scowled at the filth on his boots. He scowled at the idling battle tanks with their tracks caked in mud and at the troops squatting around fires, playing cards, working combat drills and muttering about the heat. It was sweltering in the vicinity of what used to be Hades Hive, now little more than a crater – a rotting carcass laid open to the rain. Several months had passed since the desolation of the city, but the reek of death and the mewling presence of bereavement persisted.

Vinyar scowled about that too. He deplored weakness.

So far, he had seen precious little to be sanguine about on Armageddon. The rain was just the latest annoyance.

Three days they had been stuck out in these rancid wastes, enduring the industrial stench that infested every molecule of air like a contagion, waiting for the regiment to muster.

Now, inexplicably to his mind, they were at an impasse.

He found Sergeant Tuurok standing by a strategium table, looking at reconnaissance maps as the downpour soaked him and his war council.

Camp had been struck, the tents and prefabs collapsed in preparation for imminent assault. The need to linger baffled the Marines Malevolent captain.

‘Why aren’t we advancing?’ Vinyar demanded, barging into the strategy briefing with neither care nor recognition for the six human officers of the Astra Militarum.

One, a lieutenant judging by his dirty rank pins, attempted an introduction.

‘85th Ocanon Phalanx, my lord. It’s a pleasure to–’

Vinyar briefly turned his ire on the lieutenant. ‘Not for me it isn’t. I don’t care who you are or that you’re pleased to be fighting alongside the Malevolents.’ His attention swung like an angry search light back to Tuurok.

‘There is a problem, brother-captain,’ said Tuurok, wise enough to get straight to the point.

Vinyar glared. Warm rain pounded his shoulder guards, drenching his dyed black ermine cloak and streaking down the lines of old scars that ravaged his face. Grizzled was not the word for Vinyar; in all his years of warmongering, he had long-since gone beyond that.

‘Elaborate,’ he ordered, the broken servos in his power glove whirring impotently.

‘The orks have taken prisoners. They sent this as evidence and a warning.’ Tuurok gestured to one of his men, who pulled back a small piece of tarpaulin to reveal the severed head that had been sitting on the table.

‘It’s Commissar Rauspeer,’ uttered one of the humans.

Vinyar glanced in his direction and guessed the black-coated youth had been this Rauspeer’s second-in-command.

‘They sent it?’ Vinyar asked Tuurok, incredulous.

‘Catapulted from the ruins, sir.’

Tuurok opened his gauntleted fist. He held three human fingers. Two wore rings, the third had a tattoo.

‘These were stuffed in the mouth.’

Vinyar examined them.

He looked up to survey the assembly – the human officers, the two Malvolents. His honour guard waited quietly behind him, bolters locked across their chests.

‘And?’ he asked. ‘It’s a crater, sergeant. A shanty town. Storm the hive, or what’s left of it. Bring this fight to an end so we can move on.’

‘With respect, my lord,’ said the lieutenant, ‘if we do that, they will kill every one of their captives, including three of our commanding officers.’ He pointed at some markings on the map. ‘Our scouts have them being held at this–’

The officer stopped when Vinyar raised his gauntleted hand.

‘Enough,’ hissed the Malevolent. His jaw clenched. He looked ready to snap. Maybe he would start with this impudent mortal’s neck.

‘You’re all dismissed,’ he said, ‘immediately. I need to speak to my warriors alone.’

After exchanging a few wary glances, the Astra Militarum officers left the strategium table and returned to their own ranks. Most did so gratefully.

Sergeant Tuurok kept his head raised and his hands braced against the table throughout the sudden exodus.

‘The Ocanon won’t fight,’ he said as soon as they were gone. ‘They refuse to–’

Vinyar struck him across the chin with his club-like power fist. Mercifully disengaged, it still bludgeoned Tuurok and put him on one knee.

‘No excuses,’ snarled Vinyar. ‘Cleanse the hive. Whatever it takes.’

‘Brother-captain, the tactical situation–’

As fast as mercury, Vinyar seized Tuurok by the throat and lifted him back onto his feet.

The warrior by Tuurok’s side, his adjutant, shifted uncomfortably but said nothing and did nothing to intervene. He knew better than to cross Vinyar.

‘We’ve wasted enough time already. Orks are moving across the Diablo Mountains and I need reinforcements in that region. We cannot afford to ignore Hive Hades until the greenskins within are dead. We risk being outflanked if they choose to mobilise, but we are hunting savages in caves. It should not be beyond us.’ Vinyar clenched Tuurok’s neck a little tighter, squeezing a half-choked rasp from the sergeant. ‘Are you now clear on the tactical situation, brother-sergeant?’

Vinyar held on a little longer to make his point then released Tuurok, who had to cough some air back into his lungs before he could reply.

‘We need them. They refuse to fight with their leaders still inside Hades, and we can’t force them.’

Another bout of violent apoplexy was stalled as Vinyar caught sight of the map. The holding pens or whatever they were where the orks had their prisoners were deep in the heart of the crater, in the depths of the old sundered hive. He lifted his gaze to stare across the annihilation left by the ork bombardment. The ruins of the hive city guttered with fires. Smoke billowing from immense pyres of wreckage and human corpses obscured much of the skeletal remains.

Six weeks into the war, an orbital bombardment had turned the hive into a husk. In truth, bombardment was an overly prosaic term for what the orks

had done. More accurate would be to say the orks unleashed an asteroid against the city, atomising it and all those within. The earth around the blast site had crystallised under the immense pressure and heat expelled in the attack. An exothermic reaction several magnitudes greater than any conventional ordnance had vaporised watercourses, flattened structures and reduced forests to ash within a two-kilometre radius.

So rapid and whole was the city's execution that it had become a dire reminder of Ghazghkull Thraka's power and the ork warlord's desire for wanton destruction. The ruins of Hades had become the domain of the ork, haunted by ghosts – men and women who had died so quickly and violently that they didn't realise they were revenants. Like a plague that infests a carcass and begins to colonise the necrotic flesh, the orks had turned what little there was left of Hades into a fortress of sorts. And though it had zero strategic value, it did harbour a significant gathering of ork military strength. Therefore, it could not be ignored and it was almost as if Thraka knew this would be the case. Encourage men to defend ruins and fight over the dead. Let them cling to the wreckage of their cities and their lives, whilst the orks rampaged and revelled in the act of warmongering.

Vinyar considered himself a warmonger. For him, and the rest of the Marines Malevolent, their crusade was unending. In his warrior's heart, he could not conceive of a time when creatures such as he and those he commanded would no longer be necessary. War did not end. Peace was illusory. There was only the next battle.

Savagery and bestial nature aside, Vinyar wondered privately if the Malevolents and this Thraka were so different. Then he hawked up a gobbet of phlegm and spat it out, as if to expel the thought as well as his grainy sputum.

A sudden burst of prickling wind skirled loudly across the barren wastes beyond the crater of Hades Hive. It stole away the smoke and carried the animalistic bellows and porcine grunting of the beasts within. So too did the wind bring forth the stench of the greenskins' dung and the boiling pig-fat reek of slow-cooked human flesh. Vinyar glared and felt his ire deepen for the ork and their pugnacity.

I'll smack that belligerence out of you…

'Captain,' a voice uttered from behind him.

Vinyar turned and saw a third warrior standing by Sergeant Tuurok. Like

the other Malevolents he was clad in bile-yellow and coal-black armour and moved with a predatory grace. His helmet was loosely attached to his belt, not mag-locked but held by a strap of leather. Though still battered, some of his battleplate looked more robust than the rest, as if it were an amalgam and not a concomitant suit. Scraped paint revealed some of the nature of who it had been taken from – black with a white templar cross.

He wore his hammer strapped diagonally across his back – its haft jutted out above his left shoulder guard, the head visible just past his right hip. He looked battle-worn but vital, and was less scarred than Vinyar. Shoulder-length, pearl-white hair framed his face, giving the warrior a pseudo-angelic cast, but there was hate enough in his dark eyes to drown nations.

The sight of him brought up something unpleasant in Vinyar's throat and hardened the captain's barricade of clenched teeth.

'Kastor,' he said, almost snarling.

Amongst the Malevolents, the Vilifiers were the elite. Few in number, they were drawn from all ten companies, even the Scouts, and represented the most brutal fighters in the Chapter.

Kastor was their commanding officer.

'We can breach the crater that has confounded your men,' said Kastor, evenly.

'And do what exactly once you're in there?' asked Vinyar.

Scarcely five strides separated them and, although they were brothers-in-arms, they came across more like two fighters preparing to duel.

Kastor snorted, as if the answer was obvious. 'To rescue the hostages, of course.'

Vinyar's gravelly, roaring laughter sounded incongruous coming from the stern captain and drew several glances from nearby Guard officers who dared to look at him.

'That is amusing,' he conceded. 'I would dearly like to see you try, Kastor. Perhaps the death that's owed you will finally seek you out.'

'Perhaps, captain.'

Vinyar's sardonic humour vanished, replaced by rancour. 'I am not your captain,' he uttered darkly.

'No, you aren't,' Kastor replied, making it clear in his tone exactly what he thought of Vinyar's supposed authority over Hades, and his orders. 'So this conversation is really just a formality, isn't it?'

Looking Vinyar in the eye, he whistled loudly.

Four warriors in the yellow and black of the Malevolents stepped out into the rain from where they had been hiding amidst the throng. They had been almost invisible until summoned. The Guardsmen standing around them, suddenly finding a quartet of hulking Space Marines in their midst, immediately jerked in surprise.

One of the four eyed up the soldiers through his vision slit, glowering silently.

Two others stood stock still, their stalker-pattern bolters hanging casually over their shoulders.

The foremost Vilifier, the only one who went without his helmet and who had a youthful look about him, nodded to Kastor.

‘Penetrating this camp was easy,’ said Vinyar, able to mask his surprise at the sudden appearance of the veterans. ‘You’ll find the ork den harder to crack.’

‘Do I have your concession then, brother-captain?’ asked Kastor. He glanced at Tuurok, who seethed impotently at the other sergeant about to usurp his mission out from under him.

Kastor afforded him a thin smile, which only enraged Tuurok further.

Vinyar ignored the histrionics. ‘I thought you didn’t need my sanction, brother?’

‘Nevertheless…’

Every fibre of Vinyar bristled with the desire to teach Kastor a salutary and punishing lesson for his arrogance. Ideally, it would be a permanent one, but he let it go. This time he had overreached himself. The orks would have him, and the dirty little thorn who had been poaching warriors from Vinyar’s ranks for over two decades would, at last, get what was coming to him.

The captain stepped aside, ushering Kastor towards what he hoped would be his doom.

It was only when Kastor had walked past him that Vinyar uttered a churlish rejoinder.

‘Watch your back, Kastor.’

‘Oh, I don’t think I’m the one who needs to look over his shoulder,’ replied Kastor without even glancing back.

‘Arrogant cur,’ spat Vinyar, muttering. He was about to vent his ire on

Kastor’s men but when he looked over to where they had been standing they were already gone, vanished into the rain and the dark.

Only the bellows of the greenskins remained, loud and bestial on the wind.

Though Vinyar hated Kastor with every iota of vitriol he could muster, he wondered if the orks knew what was coming. And for the first time since the war, he smiled.

In the wake of the asteroid strike, the greenskins had erected a fortified settlement in the citywide crater. It was a peculiar trait of the ork that they found utility in wreckage, for there had been precious little left of Hive Hades. The orks had infested it, seeing a wound they could infect and thrive in. Based on reconnaissance, current estimates had the greenskins in the region of thousands.

Lying on his stomach and supported by his elbows, Vathed observed one of the ork patrols at the perimeter with a pair of scopes pressed to his eyes. Thickly armoured, carrying fat-looking cannons and cleavers, their appearance was crude but also formidable.

‘Tough,’ he said to Narlec. ‘One of the more developed strains.’ Vathed panned the scopes across, tracking past an enclosure wall of riveted and spot-welded metal sheeting. As well as several ramshackle gun towers, the wall also marked the border to the ork slum itself. A cluster of ugly, stacked hutments rose and sank at the false horizon line created by the wall, giving the impression of an undulating urban sprawl of closely abutted structures and narrow avenues.

Vathed spied two relatively scrawny specimens manning the watchtowers. They bracketed a large iron gate that was wrought into the wall. Eight metres across, it was wide enough for a vehicle column to pass through.

It was also the least heavily guarded approach into the hive.

‘Two spotters in the gun nests,’ said Vathed.

‘We’ll need to take them first,’ Narlec replied, rising into a crouched position so he could ready his bolter.

Vathed was still at the scopes. ‘No search lamps.’

‘Orks have good night vision,’ Narlec replied, patting Vathed on the shoulder to let him know he was ready.

Vathed nodded, panned the scopes across the gate area again to be sure, then opened up the vox. ‘I estimate eight targets defending this approach.’

‘Received,’ Kastor’s voice crackled over the other end of the link. ‘Ingress in one minute.’

Narlec nodded this time, and contacted his brother sniper in the field.

‘Sykar…’

‘Left or right, brother?’

‘Right,’ said Narlec without hesitation, adding, ‘synchronising,’ as a chrono flashed up on the squad’s retinal displays already counting down from sixty seconds.

Vathed packed up the scopes, staying flat, and brought up his bolter.

‘We won’t need you,’ Narlec told him.

Vathed didn’t answer.

Part of his left retinal lens was synched with his brother’s visual feed. The greenskin on the right had just come into focus through Narlec’s stalker sight. He aimed for the ear, knowing, as they all did, that this route presented the path of least resistance to the ork brain.

For a few seconds, the wind howled and the deep, distant bellowing of greenskins continued as they revelled in whatever crude entertainments occupied and diverted them. Scattered gunfire added to the clamour as the greenskins randomly discharged their weapons.

The chrono counter struck zero.

Two simultaneous coughs of ballistic discharge sounded, one close, the other much farther away.

Through his bolter’s iron-sights and Narlec’s feed, Vathed saw the orks in either watchtower crumple at the same time, a short puff of crimson misting the air before their skulls exploded.

The larger orks patrolling the wall were slow to react. By the time they did, two warriors armoured in black and yellow were already amongst them.

Ballack had drawn his knife. Like the lighter parts of his armour, he had dulled the blade’s gleam with ash but not its monomolecular edge. Approaching the first ork from behind, he rammed the knife into its neck all the way to the hilt and then began to drag it through its rugose flesh.

He dropped the ork, letting the heavy body slump against the battlement, already moving to the second greenskin. It had half turned before Ballack managed to jab his knife under the beast’s armpit where its armour was thin

and push the blade all the way to the heart. Forgetting its weapons, the ork clawed at Ballack, raking the Malevolent's faceplate and gorget. Though lean, Ballack was strong, but the ork was overpowering him even in the midst of its dying. Wrenching the knife free, Ballack released a fount of dark blood and then stabbed again.

The ork convulsed in agony, barely able to croak let alone roar, and bit down on the joint between Ballack's gorget and pauldron. He cried out, managing to muffle his pain but felt savage greenskin fangs tearing at the vulnerable flesh of his neck.

Ballack clamped his free hand over the ork's skull and began to squeeze. After a few seconds, the bone began to yield but it only made the greenskin bite down even harder.

An anguished gurgle escaped Ballack's lips as he faced the genuine and unpleasant prospect of being killed by an enemy in its death throes. He jerked the knife, striving to saw upwards through vital organs but the ork's bone cage was tough and Ballack was getting weaker.

Between the blood pulsing thunderously in his ears, Ballack heard distant bellowing and gunfire as the orks embedded deeper in the slum revelled, oblivious to the lives ending at their gates.

A second burst of fire and brutish revelry resounded. It came with a much louder bolter shot, deafening next to Ballack's ear. Bone fragments and ruddy matter spattered noisily against his helmet, muddying his view through his retinal lenses. The ork stopped biting. Its head had been reduced to biological debris now scattered over Ballack and the wall.

As the greenskin fell, Ballack saw Kastor finishing off the last of them. His hammer's haft was pressed against the ork's neck from behind as he slowly crushed its trachea and strangled it.

'You still alive?' he asked, releasing the dead greenskin to slump down with the others.

There were two orks killed in the nests, another six on the wall and two of those were ranged executions.

Ballack nodded, irritated, and pressed a hand against the jetting artery in his neck until his Larraman's organ clotted the blood.

'You owe Vathed a life,' said Kastor.

The appearance of a ninth sentry below interrupted Ballack's reply. Looking up, the ork noticed its slain comrades and their killers but the

realisation was slow to dawn as it went to draw a pistol.

‘Mine,’ snarled Ballack, now with something to prove. He cast his bloody knife, lodging it between the greenskin’s eyes. The creature stared dumbly at the Malevolent for a few seconds before collapsing dead.

Kastor holstered his pistol and voxed the others.

‘The gate. Three minutes,’ he said, then turned to Ballack. ‘You’re getting slow.’

Ballack scowled. ‘The beast was lucky.’

Kastor didn’t answer as he made his way down from the wall.

The blood had clotted. Ballack pulled out the ork teeth lodged in his neck, and followed.

From beyond the wall, Vathed and Narlec were moving. Leaving his enfilading position in the distance, Sykar did the same.

‘You were saying?’ Vathed asked Narlec.

The marksman shrugged.

‘I said it wasn’t necessary. It wasn’t. Not for me.’

Narlec then gestured towards their destination. The wall was getting closer.

‘I doubt Ballack will thank you, though.’

Vathed frowned. He was still relatively new to the unit and had yet to fully appreciate and understand its dynamic. ‘I just saved his life.’

‘No, brother,’ Narlec corrected. ‘You just took his kill.’

Vathed scoffed. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘Tell that to the Black Templar whose armour Ballack’s wearing.’

They spoke no further. They reached the gate and continued into the ork slum of Hive Hades.

Kastor had only got a glance at the reconnaissance maps. It was all he needed. The configuration drawn on the map was a solid representation of the actual position of the crude structures within the cratered hive. Despite the obvious devastation unleashed by the asteroid strike and the subsequent depravations of the greenskins, much of the lower hive remained. Below ground it had survived some of the impact, even if its occupants had not.

Charred bodies still mouldered, left out in the rain, their broken limbs difficult to differentiate from the industrial debris jutting from the morass of wreckage.

Kastor moved low and quickly through the charnel fields, using the drifting palls of smoke to obscure his approach. The hammer on his back was an impediment, but it was the spoils of a much earlier conflict and one he did not plan to relinquish. Ork spoor was everywhere. It lay thick on the air, which was already heavy with heat and animal sweat. Something porcine resonated about the greenskins, especially the larger ones. Their close guttural grunting, their willingness to wallow in their own filth together with a propensity to herd gave the association weight.

Kastor had studied the ork since before the incident aboard the *Byzantine* and months prior to the Third Armageddon War. He had watched their behaviour on the battlefield, paid attention to their habits and tactics, their hierarchy, even going so far as to observe apothecarion autopsy. It had made him a more efficient killer of the xenos, whilst also enhancing his chances of survival in every encounter with them. It was the same with all of his enemies.

Know thine enemy.

It was a maxim adopted by all Adeptus Astartes, but none more so than Kastor.

He paused, dropping to his haunches as he signalled for the warriors behind him to emulate.

A few seconds later, a sizeable horde of the beasts tramped by, snorting and grunting in their crude tongue. They were armed with guns and cleavers as before, and muscular bodies strapped with plate. They clanked noisily as they moved, making Kastor's task easier by degrees. Even so, he stayed low until he was sure they were gone, hunkered down in a wreckage-strewn alleyway with high-sided corrugated structures on both flanks.

Relaxing a little, Kastor signalled for the squad to resume their advance through the slum.

When they had reached an abandoned hutment, Kastor moved inside and gave the order to halt.

'We are close,' he said, keeping his voice low. 'Those orks we narrowly avoided are part of the ruling caste.'

'One ork looks much the same as the other,' said Vathed, without sarcasm.

Kastor nodded. 'Darker skin, a more pronounced brow,' he gestured to his own physiognomy for emphasis, 'and their size, of course. The larger ones dominate by strength, but are also more disciplined and intelligent. Don't be

fooled by their bestial nature.’

Vathed nodded, grateful for the lesson.

‘How soon until the sentries we killed are discovered?’ asked Ballack, eager to be moving so he could expunge the stain on his honour. He had removed his damaged helmet and his thin face appeared gaunt in the shallow light.

He, Kastor and Vathed were huddled in the middle of the dirty hutment, surrounded by greenskin detritus. A flickering lamp pack swung overhead that looked like it was jury-rigged on a whim. The air reeked of dung. Dark tracts of it streaked the rough walls. Whatever purpose the hutment had served previously, it now resembled a latrine.

‘Patrols were erratic,’ Vathed answered, but continued at Kastor’s silent urging. ‘I’d estimate no more than an hour before the sentries are missed.’

‘Even if the orks do find their dead before then, it’s not guaranteed they will sound an alarm,’ said Narlec, partially distracted as he affixed an underslung grenade launcher to his stalker-pattern bolter.

His brother, Sykar, maintained watch by the hutment’s north-facing vision slit. The roof would have offered a better vantage, but it was too exposed and might have yielded beneath his power armoured weight. He kept quiet. Narlec knew his mind and could speak it in his absence.

‘Agreed,’ replied Ballack, nudging one of two greenskin corpses they had found inside. It was rank, recently dead. So too was the other one. Some kind of territorial dispute as far as anyone could tell. Ballack gave a low chuckle. ‘Leave them long enough and the orks will probably kill each other before we even need to fire a shot.’

Kastor gave a derisory snort.

‘No,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘these creatures clearly have leadership. Yes, they squabble, they fight and even kill each other, but they also patrol, arm themselves and mass in squads. It isn’t a horde – it’s an army. Organised, calculating and in numbers. Vinyar is a piece of filth I wouldn’t deign to scrape off my boot, but he was also right. We have to cleanse the hive. Quickly.’

According to the reconnaissance map, they were standing close to the outer edge of the pit, ground zero for the asteroid strike. Several hundred metres below was where Imperial intelligence had placed the location of the prisoners.

‘Here is where we break ranks, brothers,’ Kastor told them. He gestured to Vathed. ‘Auspex.’

Vathed proffered the handheld device. It was already engaged and flashing silently.

One of the Imperial officers had been implanted with a loc-beacon. Command had the requisite ident frequency but it had only recently activated with the Vilifiers’ proximity to the pit.

‘We three will follow this down,’ said Kastor, eyeing Ballack and Vathed.

Ballack was quick to object. ‘Two men are quicker and quieter than three.’ He jerked his chin at Vathed. ‘Let the fresh blood keep sentry. You and I can do the necessary killing.’

Ballack had been a Vilifier for over three decades. He and Kastor went back a long way, but none of their history prevented Kastor from shaking his head.

‘You almost got yourself killed on the wall, brother. You almost threw this mission. I know the Templar clipped you, Ballack. The wound is slowing you down.’

‘That was months past,’ Ballack protested. ‘I am fine. I can–’ He stopped talking when he felt the knife edge touching his exposed neck.

‘Did you even see it drawn?’ Kastor asked, holding his blade in a steady, certain grip. ‘There was a time when you would have. If I thrust now, you would be dead.’

Ballack’s hand gripped his own combat knife, but it stayed sheathed.

He snarled through clenched teeth. ‘I can still serve.’

Kastor nodded. ‘If I believed anything other than that, I would kill you myself at this very moment.’ He sheathed the knife.

Ballack sagged a little, but did not reach up to touch the blood on his neck. He glared at Vathed, who looked utterly unfazed.

Kastor had already moved on.

‘Narlec, Sykar…’

Narlec spoke for them both. ‘We’ll secure egress for your return. Try not to tarry, though, sergeant.’

‘Noted,’ answered Kastor, without humour. The guttural cadence of greenskins grew louder as a patrol drew near. ‘We move.’

At the heart of the impact crater, the proliferation of greenskin construction

intensified.

Crude gantries and ramshackle walkways crossed the mouth of the pit in an ugly web of corrugated iron and sheet steel. Barricades had been pressure-bolted to the sides of the larger concourses, and there were ladders trailing down to where the orks had fashioned rough landing platforms and salvage yards. Nothing was wasted, and in the light of hundreds of drum fires the Vilifiers saw an army of greenskins scurrying and toiling. Some were the large, brutish orks they had fought already. More numerous were the diminutive gretchin, shrieking and cackling as they laboured. Tracked cannons, half-finished tank chasses, the scratch-built fuselage of a lander; a great war machine was slowly taking shape in the pit, a horde of cannons, vehicles and aircraft that concerned Vinyar.

Somewhere in the midst of all the heavy labour were the prisoners the Vilifiers sought.

Without the auspex, Vathed could not determine exactly which of the hundreds of workshops, hangars or silos contained the Imperial officers. He suspected it would be deep, so he aimed his magnoculars down towards the nadir of the pit. The dark rock still squatted there, sharp-edged, black and bleeding radiation heat.

His armour's biometrics told Vathed that the radiation was sufficiently low level not to present a hazard. He assumed the orks were largely immune to the immense rock's effects as they cut into it with drills, explosives and pneumatic picks. They were harvesting, cutting out the asteroid's core and using it as fuel. The potential volatile reaction appeared not to perturb the greenskins in the slightest, who hewed away merrily.

Kastor's voice came over the vox-link through a minor ripple of radiation distortion.

'There.'

The three Vilifiers maintained a dispersed squad coherency, close enough to see one another but needing the audio feed in their helmets to communicate.

Kastor had marked the position of the prisoners and fed the data to the retinal display of all three Vilifiers. It was close to where Vathed had predicted, and he smiled at the vindication of his instincts.

'Descend and converge on marked location,' said Kastor, before going vox-silent.

Vathed assessed his first target, then looked across at his comrades expecting to see them doing the same but Ballack and Kastor were already gone.

With no suppressor fitted to his bolter like Narlec and Sykar had, Vathed knew it would be blade-work all the way down to where Kastor had marked the hangar. Taking sight of his prey, he vaulted the short lip of the barricade surrounding the pit and drew his knife.

Close kills were Ballack's preference. To his mind, there was no surer way to confirm an enemy's death than when you looked into its eyes and saw life depart. His weapon of choice, though, would have been the chainblade currently strapped onto his back.

Anointed with transhuman blood, it was the weapon with which he had defeated Tiamed in an honour duel, claiming his armour as the prize and earning the eternal enmity of the Black Templars. That selfsame duel had left Ballack diminished, with a deep wound yet to properly heal.

At night it discomforted him, but pain was a warrior's only bedfellow, that and his memories of war. It was how the wound had made him slower that haunted Ballack. He knew Kastor was watching him now. He had to prove he was still worthy of the Vilifiers. No one ever left by choice or sanction; the only way out was the end of duty and Ballack was not yet ready to relinquish his.

A brief flash of movement to his far left caught Ballack's eye. He saw Vathed, and followed his bloody progress across the gantry.

Ballack's own kills were mounting up too and his knife blade was ruddy with smeared ork blood. He crouched, taking up a position behind a barricade, knowing he would not be seen. Vathed was oblivious to being watched. Cutting down a greenskin with a stealth and efficiency that Ballack had to admit was impressive, Vathed approached the edge of a junction. Two sentries loitered at either fork. A third stood in Vathed's path, as yet unaware of the other Malevolent's presence.

'Kastor says I owe you a life,' Ballack murmured, drawing his bolter and taking aim.

He waited for a lull in the industrial clamour before executing the third sentry.

Blood and matter spattered Vathed’s armour and faceplate as he was about to make the kill. The shot that took out the ork sentry was still resounding. Instinctively, he sought cover before realising it wasn’t a greenskin that had missed its mark – it was a shooter that had known exactly what he was doing.

Several orks in the immediate vicinity turned, trying to pinpoint the sound. They looked in the shooter’s direction but he was already gone, dropped out of sight. Instead, their collective gaze was drawn to Vathed.

As the two sentries bellowed their anger, three more orks nearby clambered from their own vantage points to join them. Through the grated metal under his feet, Vathed saw another two greenskins jabbing fingers in his direction and shouting gutturally to their comrades.

He mumbled something under his breath, sheathing his knife and pulling out his bolter.

Ballack, he thought, trying to focus his anger at the greenskins. *It had to be*.

Vathed downed the first sentry, putting a round through the ork’s neck, before the solid slugs from the greenskins’ guns hammered around him in a storm of shells.

Ballack smiled from below, quickly moving through the shadows now that his route had been miraculously cleared of sentries.

‘Debt paid,’ he muttered, glancing at Vathed retreating back along the gantry and drawing the orks on. ‘A life for a life.’

Kastor had not been specific about whose.

Ballack met Kastor at the north side of the hangar where the Imperial officers were being held. He had missed him at first, overshooting the sergeant’s clandestine position and only righting his error when Kastor had hissed from the shadows.

‘Over here.’

Now they were both crouched on their hands and knees in a rusted section of ducting that fed directly into the hangar.

Ballack observed the activity in the main hangar bay through a wire mesh, taking care to keep within the shadows.

‘The prisoners are here,’ he whispered to Kastor, who was leaning against

the side of the duct to check his weapons.

Even though the hangar was only lit by a single drum flame, Ballack discerned the Astra Militarum officers in the penumbral gloom. They were on their knees, heads down and hands behind their backs. Judging by the flecks of blood on the floor and the ragged bearing of the men, all six had been beaten.

'Then let's move quickly,' Kastor replied. 'That distraction you orchestrated with Vathed won't last long.'

Ballack gave the equivalent of a facial shrug. 'He might survive.'

'Even if he does, he'll have to make a lot of noise. The greenskins will know we're here.'

Ballack nodded, turning his full attention back to the hangar. There were six ork guards, two hugging the main entrance, three directly below and one more occupying an improvised gun nest that overlooked the entire bay floor.

That one would have to die first.

Ballack did not bother to kick in the mesh, he just leapt through it.

The mesh grate landed with a loud clatter. Humans and greenskins inside the hangar turned, surprised by the sudden clamour.

By the time Kastor got through, Ballack had already executed the lookout with a three-round burst from his bolter. A hard, metal *chank* signalled that the gun had jammed. Ballack dropped the bolter to unhitch his chainblade. The teeth were already growling as Kastor's booted feet struck the metal floor with a heavy thunk.

He shot the two at the door, opting to strafe and incapacitate rather than kill. A kill-shot would be too slow. He needed the orks down immediately.

Ballack was weighing in against the three who had been standing guard by the prisoners. He cut the forearm off the first before cleaving its leg in two. A second went at him with its already drawn cleaver, ork steel meeting Adeptus Astartes adamantium chain-teeth. Sparks cascaded in a violent cataract of light.

The third ork racked the slide of its gun, a boxy-looking cannon with a perforated barrel and a wide, yawning muzzle. It was belt-fed with shells the size and thickness of Kastor's fist. It was going for the prisoners, some rudimentary part of its base intelligence or instinct telling it that the

enemies in its midst had come to rescue them, and that denying them victory was all that mattered.

To their immense credit, three of the captured Imperial officers rose as one. With their hands still bound behind their backs, they barrelled into their captor in an attempt to buy their rescuers more time.

Kastor saw one of the orks he had incapacitated at the entrance crawling on its belly and reaching up to escape and signal for help. He ignored it for now, running for the Imperial officers that had attacked the other guard.

Two of them were down, and one was almost certainly dead with his neck bent at an awkward, unnatural angle. The other was prone but unmoving. Kastor hit the ork around the waist, using his momentum and sheer armoured bulk to tackle the beast to the ground and get it away from the prisoners.

It struggled on its back, aiming a wild punch that glanced the side of Kastor's helm. Ears ringing, Kastor brought the stock of his bolter down hard, breaking the beast's nose. It roared, angry and in pain, but threw the Malevolent off and across the hangar floor.

Heaving itself to its feet, the ork charged at him, just as Kastor had wanted it to.

He left the bolter and came up swinging with the hammer instead. One blow, tight beneath the ork's jutting chin, was enough to separate its head from its body. It ran on a few paces, arterial spray painting the ductwork above it a dark crimson, before it slumped to its knees and fell forwards.

Kastor was breathing hard and his hearts were beating strongly, vitally. Hatred for the ork was slow to subside, but he forced a thin smile. War was good, he had decided long ago; it showed you who you were in the eyes of your enemies and the glorious countenance of the Emperor.

Ballack had given his own demonstration. Two orks lay dead and dismembered at his feet. Unlike Kastor, he grinned wildly through a mask of blood.

The sound of claws scraping against metal seized Kastor's attention and he remembered the ork that was trying to escape.

Two hard bangs rang out, echoing loudly in the vast hangar expanse.

Ballack lowered his bolter, having cleared the jam and hefting it one-handed.

Both orks by the entrance were dead, each killed by a headshot.

‘Still too slow?’ he asked, facing Kastor.

Kastor had removed his helmet, glad to be free of its confines for a minute at least. He gestured to the blood oozing through the savage rents in Ballack’s armour.

‘Still slow, but you are more than deadly enough.’

‘I’ll take that,’ he conceded.

The vox crackled.

‘You bastards.’

It was Vathed.

‘If you’re angry, it means you’re alive and can still walk,’ answered Kastor.

‘Barely.’

‘Then regroup with the others. We have the objective and are making our extraction now.’

Vathed grunted some expletive and cut the link.

‘He sounded far from sanguine,’ uttered Kastor, hitching his hammer before picking up his discarded bolter.

‘At least he lives.’

Kastor raised an eyebrow.

‘You sure you’re glad about that?’

Ballack sheathed his chainblade and checked his bolter’s ammunition gauge.

‘He knows the rules now. My kills are my kills. If he respects that, he will live longer.’

‘More than ruthless enough too, brother.’

Ballack paused a beat before asking, ‘Were you goading me?’

‘Yes,’ Kastor said honestly. ‘I found out you still have your edge and that Vathed is a worthy warrior for the Vilifiers.’

‘You knew I would do that to him.’

‘I hoped you wouldn’t kill him. The rest was open to your interpretation.’

Satisfied, Ballack nodded as Kastor donned his helmet again. He turned to the prisoners.

‘Hadn’t we better take what we came for?’

Kastor nodded, acknowledging the Imperial officers too. Four of the six were dead, killed during the fight or having already been slain.

Of the two who remained, only one was still on his feet. He looked like a

commissar, possibly another subordinate of Rauspeer whose headless corpse was busy putrefying slumped against the hangar wall.

‘Traeger,’ he said, by way of introduction. ‘Do you have a weapon?’ he asked, matter-of-factly.

‘Several,’ Kastor replied, looking down at the impudent man and taking an instant dislike to him.

‘One I can wield.’

Traeger had been beaten, but was unbowed. The proud defiance of the Militarum Tempestus emanated from the man’s bearing and his frost-bright eyes.

‘What for?’ asked Ballack, noticing one of the man’s fingers was missing.

‘We’re getting you out of here, Commissar Traeger,’ Kastor told him. ‘You and…’

The commissar glanced at the other Imperial survivor, unconscious on the floor.

‘Colonel Egilson,’ he said. ‘And we can’t leave yet. There is another group of prisoners, held deeper into the pit. Your knife?’ he suggested.

Kastor glanced at the monomolecular blade sheathed at his hip then met the commissar’s querying gaze.

‘You alone were our mission. There are no others.’

The commissar was adamant. ‘There are six men still being held against their will.’

‘Those men are dead, commissar,’ Kastor told him.

‘They are alive,’ Traeger argued.

Kastor took a forward step. They were running out of time. By now, the orks would have suspected what was going on and would be moving on the hangar.

‘No, you don’t understand. Those men are dead.’

Traeger understood, but could not mask his disgust.

‘This is heresy.’

‘No it isn’t,’ said Kastor. ‘This is war, and you don’t survive it by engaging in foolish heroics. We cannot reach those men. Even now we are being surrounded. Time has run out for your comrades. Those men are already dead.’

Commissar Traeger stood straight, chin raised imperiously towards the Vilifier. He was adamant. ‘We are not leaving without them.’

Kastor sighed, lifting his gaze to Ballack as an unspoken agreement passed between them.

Vinyar was waiting in the rain with Tuurok by his side. His command squad lurked in the background as still as statues.

Behind them stood several armour columns and the serried infantry ranks of the Astra Militarum. Camp had been struck and emptied; men and materiel had been readied for war. Thousands of tanks and infantry, enough to breach even the depths of Hades.

Wrathful, eager for vengeance, these men would tear down the hive city's walls to get to the murderous greenskins. Arguably, the rage of the rank and file was more incandescent upon hearing of their officers' deaths than it was when they had first learned of their capture.

Only two had came back from the thirteen who had been taken. One, Colonel Egilson, would likely not survive the night. The other, Commissar Traegar, had apparently died during the desperate mission undertaken by the Vilifiers to extract the prisoners. It was sour news, but all who heard it could not help but applaud the heroic efforts of Brother-Sergeant Kastor and his squad.

As the armoured columns rolled out and the long-ranged, heavy ordnance erupted with tectonic peals of plosive thunder, Vinyar found himself in the presence of the sergeant again.

'You owe me a debt, brother-captain,' Kastor said.

Vinyar laughed. 'For what?'

'Conflict resolution.'

'Emerging from that hellhole with barely a scratch…'

Now it was Kastor's turn to laugh. 'I had hatred to sustain me.'

Vinyar nodded at the vengeful Imperial Guard hordes surging past them.

'Men can be savage when pushed.'

'And savagery can be useful,' Kastor replied. 'Vengeance is a much better motivator than gratitude.'

'Indeed.' Vinyar turned to face him. 'So, the debt I owe you…'

Kastor was already walking away.

'Let me think on it,' he replied. 'Have a good war, brother-captain.'

Vinyar watched him go. The vainglorious cur. He wanted to kill Kastor where he stood, but he would not do it whilst the scales between them were

unbalanced and Kastor knew that. Unscrupulous he might be, Vinyar still had a code of honour.

Kastor was a student of conflict. He had a way of escaping danger, both physical and political. Not to say he was a coward; far from it. He was merely adept at reducing risk, and blunting his enemies' knives before they had even thought to draw them. It was a talent, but Vinyar also had talents. He knew things: names, information. History. He might be impotent to move against Kastor whilst he was in the sergeant's debt but trouble could still find him.

'A good war,' Vinyar murmured. 'You too, brother-sergeant.'

He turned to Tuurok. 'I need to speak to the Templars, specifically a Sword Brethren named Vorda. He is here on Armageddon, in command of Tiamed's old squad. I believe they used to fight together.'

'Our relations with the Black Templars are still strained, sir,' replied Tuurok. 'Some of them hate us.'

'Then we are kindred spirits, Tuurok. Besides,' added Vinyar, a viper's smile creeping across his grizzled face, 'I know someone they hate even more.'

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VENGEFUL HONOUR

NICK KYME

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Orks still rampaged over Armageddon Secundus, far off in the wastes or embedded deep in the bowels of the hives they had taken. The guttural shouts and challenges of Thraka's hordes carried on a hot breeze, reeking of ash and ripe with the stench of burning meat.

The distant ruckus soon faded into obscurity, though, as ubiquitous as the wind.

In the shadow of the Diablo Mountains and the Camp Fortis, the dull scrape of a whetstone broke the stillness. Ballack knew a combat blade's monomolecular edge needed little sharpening but considered it a ritual.

A Space Marine seldom slept, ate or drank, his every thought and deed bent towards being a better warrior. Stronger, tougher, deadlier.

Of late, Ballack had felt his transhuman prowess ebbing. A deep wound inflicted during an honourless duel had healed poorly. Perhaps it was karmic. His was the dirty blow, ending the duel but earning an injury in return. It had left his skin knotted and scarred. The flesh was tight and the muscle stiff. It had diminished him.

His brothers knew it, and they would not tolerate his weakness. Not for long. Not in the Marines Malevolent as part of the elite Vilifiers.

Ballack thought he heard Kastor training nearby. He wondered if his captain had Narlec or Vathed in 'the ring' with him, or perhaps he had found a warrior from another Chapter to hone his skills against. There were many Adeptus Astartes on this dirty world, not all considered allies by the Malevolents.

There was no sparring cage as such, only the ruins of the billet tents,

basically all that was left of Armageddon in the regions still held by Imperial forces.

From Hades, more a burning crater than a hive city now, the Vilifiers had moved on, seeking further battles. Orders to advance further east to secure Eumendies Bridge had stalled whilst secondary and tertiary battle companies could be mustered. Kastor reckoned on the Black Templars being a part of those forces.

That should be interesting… Ballack had thought at the time. The crusading sons of Dorn were one of those Chapters who might be considered antagonistic to the Malevolents.

His ritual not limited to his combat blade, Ballack had unsheathed and broken down a veritable arsenal.

It sat on a rough blanket in front of him.

Chainsword, several teeth detached from the belt feed awaiting - reintroduction; bolt pistol, clip and shells exposed, firing mechanism pulled out and in need of oiling; bolter, same as pistol, but with iron sights also removed and underslung grenade launcher separated from the main stock; grenade belt and all frags loose from the bandolier.

Cleaning, lapping, oiling, efficacy check, reassembly and then recheck, followed by live-fire with the exception of grenades.

A warrior was only as effective as the weapons he wielded. For Ballack, he needed each and every one to be at its optimum efficiency. His tools of war might be well-worn, like the patchwork armour that was lying next to the weapons, might but they were always combat ready.

The last blade was his by dint of theft, as was part of the war-plate now repainted in the yellow and black livery of the Malevolents. A huge double-handed sword with a concomitant power core that could energise the blade sat apart from the rest of his trappings. The hilt and quillons betrayed its provenance. Black Templars. Despite its obvious superiority to every other weapon Ballack possessed, it had remained in its sheath.

‘Are you ever going to draw that?’

Ballack looked up from honing the combat blade.

‘I assumed it was you I heard sparring, brother-captain.’

Kastor stepped into the half-shelled ruins that had recently been regaled with an Imperial flag and aquila standard. It had been a municipal hall or a temple, or something that had ceased to have any meaning or usefulness

since the war.

‘Vathed.’

‘Pity. I hoped he’d be up against your sword, perhaps have a half length of it jutting from his abdomen.’

Kastor smiled coldly. He knew of the enmity between the Vilifiers’ rawest recruit and its oldest veteran.

‘What are you doing, Ballack? Trying to compensate for the fact you’ve lost your edge?’

Ballack felt his jaw tense, and had to fight to unclench his teeth and fists. He straightened up, despising himself for grimacing with the pain and the weakness it betrayed.

‘An old dog can still bite.’

‘Even one without all its teeth?’

Ballack realised he still had the combat blade in his hand, and made a conscious effort to lower it so he would look less confrontational.

‘I have teeth.’

‘And the sword? Is that why it remains undrawn, because you want to show your teeth?’

‘I don’t need a crutch, if that’s what you’re suggesting. I keep it sheathed because it’s a trophy and I have no need for a krutting sword almost as tall as I am. Doesn’t suit me.’

Ballack was lean and wiry for a Space Marine. In the light of the buzzing sodium lamp he was working by, his face appeared gaunt and pale. Unarmoured, exposing the neural ports in the mesh that sat beneath his battleplate, he was almost a head shorter than Kastor.

His grip tightened around the combat blade.

‘Have you come to thin the herd, Kastor? Are you making way for my replacement?’

Kastor was about to leave but shook his head before stepping back into the shadows.

‘Just seeing if you still had teeth, brother. The orks beckon us again soon, and I want to know all the Vilifiers can pull their weight. If you’re not going to use the sword, though, get rid of it. We have enough enemies here without further goading the Black Templars. The armour is one thing, that’s just repurposing, but keeping trophies as if they are a foe we’ve vanquished. Not wise.’

Ballack watched him go, and felt a few more grains trickle through the neck of the hourglass. Three decades he had been a Vilifier, and a Malevolent longer than that. He supposed war ground everyone down eventually, even transhuman Space Marines.

He wouldn't sleep. None of them would. Let the Guard slumber; the mortals needed their rest. Ballack felt like doing anything but sleeping. He was restive. Angry.

After he finished stripping down and reassembling his weapons, he decided to walk to the edge of the camp. Despite what the flag and standard boasted, the ruins were not really Imperial territory. In war, ownership was ephemeral. It could shift as suddenly as a riptide, and drown the complacent and the ill-prepared in blood.

Ballack wore his armour, even the dented shoulder guard where a greenskin had tried to take a bite out of it. The teeth marks extended as high as his gorget. Any harder or longer in the vice of the ork's jaw and it would have been his neck. Too close.

He'd left most of his weapons behind, taking the combat blade and pistol because they were light. They made room for the heavy Templar sword.

Kastor had been right. Parading trophies from supposed allies attracted undue attention. Such concerns had never been his to worry about. Perhaps his morbid thoughts about his own mortality had caused them to stir?

A makeshift graveyard lay not far from the camp's border. Too grim and demoralising to be within sight of the conscripts and not so far that the orks could defile it without reprisal. It wasn't much – a scrap of earth decorated with broken swords or the stock of a lasgun rammed barrel first into the ground as a marker, chains of ident-tags wrapped around them.

Ballack felt nothing as he walked amongst the memorials. Grief was for the weak. He would bury the sword amongst the anonymity of the graves, just another hollow monument.

He had half unsheathed the blade, exposing some of the ornate filigree, when a grim voice called for his attention.

'Malevolent.'

Flat, declarative, but with that mote of arrogance they all carried.

Ballack turned, one hand on the grip of his bolt pistol, but let go when he saw the two warriors had already drawn down on him.

Inwardly, Ballack cursed.

Black Templars. Even worse was that he knew them.

‘Vorda, Mageln…’ He nodded cordially to the pair of Sword Brethren. The title was misleading. They didn’t just use swords. Vorda had an axe, Mageln a mace. It was their old sergeant, Tiamed, who had carried the sword. The same one that Ballack had been about to ram into the ground and then forget.

Vorda levelled his axe blade in challenge.

So posturing and needlessly demonstrative. Ballack wondered if every verbal exchange between Templars was conducted in so formal a manner.

‘Do you remember what I said to you when we last met, Malevolent?’ Vorda asked, snarling.

‘Your exact words?’

Vorda scowled. ‘Don’t make me gut you were you stand, whoreson. I have a debt, a levy against my honour.’

The markings on Vorda’s war-plate suggested he had been promoted in Tiamed’s stead. Ballack could not imagine how excruciating that must be for him. The guilt, allied to a deep sense of martial pride. So ambivalent.

He would have laughed out loud had he not believed the two Sword Brethren would have cut him down for his impudence.

Instead, he held up his hands.

‘Will you beg for your life, dog?’ snapped Mageln.

It speaks! thought Ballack, but again chose wisely not to voice his inner monologue.

‘You are the second person this night to compare me to a dog.’

‘An apt description,’ Mageln growled.

Ballack addressed Vorda. ‘You said, “when we meet again – and we will – there will be no duel, no quarter given.” Does slaying a fellow warrior, unarmed, in cold blood satisfy that pledge, Sword Brethren?’

Vorda smiled. Neither Templar wore his helm, presumably so Ballack could see the cold fury in their eyes or the righteous indignation. A black crusader cross marked their noble faces, a demonstration of their ardent fealty.

‘I won’t kill you here, amongst the honoured dead.’

He gestured to the blade.

‘Keep that. You might need it.’

Ballack raised one eyebrow.

‘For what, exactly?’

‘Our duel, and Tiamed’s sword the prize.’

‘And if I refuse?’

Mageln racked the slide of his bolt pistol.

Ballack nodded, approving of the strong-arm tactics.

‘I see.’

Vorda’s eyes narrowed.

He can see I’m wounded, thought Ballack. He must have known Tiamed’s blade cut deep.

‘And if I triumph,’ asked Ballack, ‘what is to stop you sending another one of your vengeful brothers after me?’

‘You won’t.’

Ballack frowned. ‘You mean, we won’t?’

‘Triumph,’ declared Vorda with cold finality. ‘But should some miracle take place, you have our word that this will be the end to it.’

Ballack jerked his head at Mageln. ‘That goes for him too, does it?’

Mageln took a forward step but a glare from Vorda stopped him going any further.

‘You will be unmourned when Vorda’s blade strikes you dead,’ he snarled, but then relented. ‘But I’ll abide by my brother’s word.’

‘See that rise,’ said Vorda, gesturing to a distant hill with his axe, ‘you have an hour. Come alone or my brethren will erase you and your kind from existence.’

‘No seconds?’ Ballack was looking at Mageln, who, despite what he had just said, didn’t seem wholly on board with the plan.

Vorda was adamant, however. ‘Just you and I. To the death.’

Ballack shrugged, trying to hide his annoyance.

‘To the death.’

The Templars departed, the armour clanking loudly in their wake, and Ballack watched them go until they were lost to shadow.

He turned to regard the site Vorda had chosen. The hill had been a landing pad. Some of the augur towers and comms-stations were still intact around it, but it had been bombed to the Eye and back. A dense crater field surrounded and invaded by ruins had no use as a landing zone anymore. It would be just fine as an arena. Far enough away that no prying eyes would

intrude, close enough that it wasn’t in the heart of ork territory.

Ballack considered returning to camp for reinforcements, but that would only further imperil his standing with the Vilifiers. Take another Templar’s head and that might garner some respect. But in truth, he went alone because he had something to prove to himself.

That he still had teeth.

By the time Ballack had gone back for his chainblade and reached the ruined hillside, it was deep into the night hours. Dawn was still far off and the darkling silhouettes of distant ork warbands plagued the horizon, set against a hazy shroud of flickering umber. The greenskins were burning again. They liked fire, or rather what it did to wood, metal and flesh.

Cresting the craggy rise meant picking his way through rubble, but Ballack soon found himself in the crater-strewn landing field.

Any bodies had since been removed, or eaten, but the wreckage laid dormant. Glyphs had been cut into a skirt of rock delineating the largest of the craters. Orks had been here, but there was no further spoor as far as Ballack could see.

He began to pace the large crater, getting a feel for it, how to stand, the slight incline to the north, the density of gravel underfoot. Ballack was about to look at his helm’s internal chrono when Vorda’s voice from the darkness answered his unspoken question.

‘I am surprised,’ he said.

Ballack noted the Sword Brethren’s axe already in his gauntleted grip.

‘And alone also…’ Vorda stepped forward in the meagre light of a halogen strip array that flickered intermittently but still had power.

‘You had me watched?’ asked Ballack. ‘Not very noble.’

‘Neither are you.’

Ballack conceded the point with a curt nod.

Both warriors were under fifty paces apart. As they circled one another like stalking wolves, the distance shrank.

‘Is this about honour for you, or something else, Vorda?’ Ballack asked, keenly appraising the Templar’s movement, the way he held his blade, his stance as he shifted.

Ballack went on, the circle ever tightening between them. ‘If you wanted revenge, you could have just shot me dead at the graveyard.’

‘I want you dead,’ Vorda told him, ‘but I want to beat you first.’

‘Ah,’ said Ballack, understanding. ‘It’s pride.’

Tiamed had been an exceptional swordsman. Ballack was just some wretch who had cut him down ingloriously, through a twist of fate rather than skill. Vorda needed to prove the truth he felt in his heart, and not the lie believed in his head, that Tiamed had been bested by a superior fighter.

A snarl came from behind Vorda’s faceplate before he spat a reply.

‘Draw my brother’s sword, so I can wrest it from your dead grasp…’

Ballack unsheathed the templar blade, admiring the craft before jamming it into the earth.

‘I am a more brutal creature.’

Vorda’s sneer came through in his tone.

‘You are unworthy of it.’

‘I cannot deny that,’ Ballack said, reaching over his shoulder to pull the chainsword from its mag-lock on his back. ‘Shall we begin?’

Vorda nodded, lowering his axe blade so it jutted at the Malevolent like an accusation or a challenge.

Thumbing the ignition stud, Ballack felt the satisfying churn of blades. About to engage, he stopped at Vorda’s upraised hand.

Ballack frowned behind his blunt faceplate. ‘Is this supposed to be guile, Templar?’

Vorda half-turned towards something he had seen in the shadows.

A shot rang out, dense, loud and rippling the air. Vorda staggered, struck in the chest. He roared, but the answering gunfire eclipsed his fury. Muzzle flash lit up the dark, kicking out solid slugs that took the Templar in the thigh, chest and shoulder.

He grunted, ‘Orks…’ and fell, wounded.

Ballack was moving, forgetting Vorda to engage the beasts emerging from the gloom. Hulking, tusked, porcine brutes, their leathern flesh was almost black not green.

Heavy shellfire detonated against Ballack’s right knee, shattering armour plate and cracking bone. He sank down to one knee, just a few strides from where Vorda had collapsed.

Three more shots hit the Templar, the blood spatter reaching Ballack’s war-plate and staining it.

The axe hitting the ground rang out like a death-knell.

Ballack had only just struggled to his feet, spitting and cursing profusely, as a second fat shell ripped up his shoulder guard and tore off a piece of breastplate.

His stunned fingers released the chainsword, which chewed and growled in empathy with its former wielder as it lay prone in the crater's blood-flecked earth.

His retinal feed told him he was wounded. Ballack's bio-signs turned amber just before his helmet got wrenched off.

The orks had done the same to Vorda too.

Without the impediment of the helm, or perhaps because they were close enough for Ballack to smell their fetid breath, he realised their skin wasn't dark on its own – the orks wore camouflage.

He reached for his knife…

A cold ring of metal pressed hard against his right temple stopped him.

'No… sudden… move.'

It spoke, haltingly, but not in its own guttural dialect. It used Gothic. The greenskins could understand and converse in the Imperial tongue. It was an aberration that stoked the fires of Ballack's hatred but since this war, little surprised him about the ork and what it was capable of.

Up close, Ballack noticed they wore something approximating uniforms and had rank insignia. It had been planned, all of it. His preconditioned reflexes told him to fight, but his gut warned against it.

Vorda was out cold and of little use.

Ballack estimated ten orks from the stench, subtle variation in grunts and their orientation around him. All were armed, wearing heavy flak coats and well organised. They had been watching the landing field, seen the two warriors enter and had waited until their attention was on each other to ambush them.

The old wound flared, and evinced a grimace. Ballack had never felt so old.

He heard the orks arguing, somewhere out of sight, falling back into their crude native language. Ballack's eyes were on Vorda. If the orks wanted them dead, they would already be dead. That meant one thing. They wanted captives. And that meant they were going to move them.

'Well,' Ballack said, scowling, 'let's get on with-'

A savage blow shook his skull like a drum.

White heat flared, blinding, deafening, cutting him off. Agony then unconsciousness stunted Ballack's tongue. Darkness came swift on its heels, filled with dreams of greenskins murmuring plans and uttering Thraka's name…

As soon as Ballack awoke, he knew he was no longer in the crater. He was still kneeling, but now a thick iron chain shackled his ankles and wrists. Dank air assailed his nostrils. He could taste heat and warm metal on his tongue. The latter was blood; the former, he assumed, must be machinery of some kind.

It was dark wherever they had been taken, and closely confined. Quiet too – the almost sub-aural drone of the ongoing war had receded to nothing.

We are underground, he realised.

Before opening his eyes, scarcely even breathing, Ballack listened.

The snorting, grunting echoes coming back at him from further down what he assumed was a tunnel suggested the orks were close. Their stench was far away enough, though, so he opened his eyes.

Vorda was watching him. Blood had caked around his left eye where it had pooled from the gash in his forehead. It made a mess of his crusader cross, but that was the least of his worries.

Careful not to raise a clamour with his own chains, Vorda lifted a gauntleted finger to his lips.

About ten strides separated them. The distant glow emanating from ork-lit fires softened the gloom and gave it an orange cast.

Ballack waited, his eyes on Vorda who was now looking past the Malevolent to something behind him.

After a few more moments, Vorda met his gaze again. He held up a splayed hand, then quickly clenched and unclenched it.

Ten greenskins, as Ballack had suspected.

He tapped two fingers to his lips, and Vorda nodded slowly.

'So they took us,' Ballack whispered, careful to keep his voice low.

Vorda nodded a second time.

'They're overseers, and not alone,' he hissed. 'I've seen and heard dozens of diminutive greenskins scurrying around. They were digging.'

'Not now, though,' Ballack replied, hearing only the muted conversation of their captors.

‘Whatever tunnel they have made is being filled… Smell that?’

Over the ork stench, Ballack couldn’t at first but then he got a faint waft of something. Fuels. Oil, fyceline, promethium, all combustible.

‘Where are we?’ he asked Vorda, carefully shifting around so he could look behind him.

From the dead end section they were chained in, the tunnel bent around at a sharp angle. Ballack saw bulky silhouettes, the errant flicker of fire.

‘West, I think,’ said Vorda.

‘Of the landing strip?’

That would bring them closer to Camp Fortis.

The orks were undermining, digging tunnels and lacing them with explosive. They meant to turn Camp Fortis into a sink hole.

Saboteurs… That explained why these greenskins were so organised. Orks were beasts, but they retained some form of structure. Ballack had fallen foul of their forward scouts, the vanguard. A larger horde was coming, headed for Fortis. Bring down the camp, attack whilst it was in disarray.

Ballack shuffled back around. ‘Our weapons–’ he was about to ask when he heard the tramp of booted feet behind him. The guttural laughter he heard as the orks got close told him that whatever they had planned wasn’t good.

‘Hsst!’

Vorda was glaring when Ballack turned back.

‘You and I are not done, Malevolent,’ he said, and drew his thumb across his gorget. ‘I made an oath to Tiamed.’

Ballack nodded, uncaring at that moment.

‘Something tells me you’re going to get your chance.’

A kick in his back sent Ballack sprawling onto his chest. They did the same to Vorda too. Ballack watched sideways as his face was pressed into the ground under an ork’s boot.

Rough hands grabbed his shoulders and arms. He felt a savage tug on the chain linking his wrists and ankles as he was yanked to his feet.

‘Eyes… down…’

Ballack obeyed, but had seen everything he needed to already.

Six orks, three apiece. Two minders on each shoulder for both him and Vorda. Another one on each of their chains, a pistol in the other hand. Closest to the tunnel mouth, Ballack was being led out in front.

‘You will regret this, filth!’ he heard Vorda spit, for which he got another beating.

As the cudgels and fists rained heavy on the Templar, the ork clutching Ballack’s chain decided to shove the business end of its pistol under the Malevolent’s chin. It forced Ballack’s chin up, but he still kept his eyes on the beast.

It was a little shorter than the Malevolent, and almost as broad without armour. Tough, but not monstrous.

‘You ’ates ’im, eh? Want kill ’im?’

The ork paused to twist the muzzle of the pistol into Ballack’s gullet. He could hear Vorda’s grunts of pain and the hard smack of the clubs hitting his body.

‘Eh?’

Ballack met the greenskin’s squinty porcine eyes and gave a slight nod.

Not as much as I want to kill you, you stinking swine.

The ork held Ballack’s gaze a little longer, as if gauging the truth of his response, and then laughed. Half grunt, half squeal, it made Ballack want to wrench the cleaver hanging from the ork’s belt and bury it in the beast’s ugly skull.

Instead, he smiled.

‘And he really wants to kill me,’ he said, struggling to eke out the words with a pistol jammed in his throat.

The ork’s humour quickly faded at the same time as the others stopped beating Vorda. Its sharp eyes betrayed a savage intelligence.

‘You gonna get chance, warrior,’ it promised. ‘Both of you.’

They were dragged in a shallow basin of rockcrete, overlooked on three sides by deep ledges filled with cackling, rowdy greenskins. They awaited a spectacle. Ballack had a good idea what that would be.

He was led into the rockcrete sink to the guttural jeers of orks and the whiny hooting of lesser greenskins, known as gretchin. All work on the tunnel had ceased as the labourers were afforded a little sport. It fed off from the dry sink, only partially dug but still jammed with explosives. The damp would foul some of the fuses, but there was so much from what Ballack could see through a grated porthole in the sink wall that it wouldn’t matter.

Once the ork minders had him in position, he was beaten as the chains

were removed from all but one wrist and then attached to an iron ring bolted into the rockcrete floor. They did the same to Vorda, who looked weary after a second battering from the ork cudgels.

The Templar glared contemptuously, first at Ballack then the greenskins around the sink until coming back to Ballack again.

‘They’ll have us fight to the death, Vorda. You and me. Then they’ll kill who survives. Probably eat us both.’

Each chain was held taut, so neither gladiator could attack until the appointed moment. Ballack thought that just as well, given the Templar’s mood.

‘So long as you die first by my hand. I can live with that.’

‘Vengeance makes you short-sighted, brother.’

Vorda sneered. ‘You are not my brother.’

‘Oi, runts!’ a deep, guttural voice bellowed above the clamouring greenskins. ‘And ’eed Arghuk…’ The rowdy mob quietened down, responding to the ork obviously in charge.

Arghuk sat on a slab of rock, a savage king on his throne, his subjects arrayed before him.

Ballack had to turn to see the ork, but both he and Vorda watched the beast as he spoke. Arghuk was bigger than the rest, but this was usual for greenskins who valued strength above all else. He had one hobnail boot perched on a crate, using it like a footstool. Ballack saw the glint of blades and a bolter stock – this was where the greenskins had put their weapons.

‘These scum are gonna fight to the def!’

Arghuk’s declaration was met with roars of approval from the mob.

‘’and to ’and!’

The roaring intensified.

‘He has us under his boot, Templar,’ said Ballack, having seen enough of the ork ‘king’. ‘Under his boot…’

Vorda’s anger blinded him to what Ballack was trying to tell him. He only saw as far as his desire for vengeance.

‘Enough words, Malevolent.’ His fists were already clenched.

He’ll come at me like a freight-hauler, thought Ballack.

‘Hur, hur, hur,’ Arghuk’s deep belly laugh mocked every shred of honour. ‘Yeah, you are givin’ us a good fight…. To the def!’

‘DEF!’

The greenskins bellowed in unison.

Both chains were slackened off. Vorda charged.

Ballack let him, bringing up his knee into the Templar's stomach as he tried to tackle him around the waist. Vorda put such ferocity into the charge that Ballack was heaved off his feet anyway.

He threw a punch and felt it strike cheekbone.

A second blow got hooked by Vorda's forearm and Ballack had a flash of white-hot pain as the Templar's forehead connected with his chin.

Stunned, he scrambled back, getting to his feet and spitting out blood.

He eyed the Templar, trying to shut out the crushing noise coming from the greenskins above. One of the beasts threw a gretchin onto Vorda's back. It stalled the Templar's next attack, but only as long as it took him to grab the shrieking little wrench and snap its neck.

That drew a welter of cruel and raucous laughter. The din increased.

Vorda came at him again, Ballack letting him take the initiative. He ducked a heavy punch, then blocked an overhand but took one in the gut. Like a pugilist, Ballack went in close and pinned Vorda's arms, trapping him in a bear hug.

'Afraid to die?' the Templar hissed, his spittle hitting Ballack's cheek as they were so close. He struggled, but Ballack held him. The pain in his wounded side was immense, but he held him.

'There's no honour in this,' he said, gritting his teeth with the effort of containing the Templar.

Above, the greenskins were getting restless for more blood.

'If it's all I have left, I'll take it.'

'As entertainment for this filth…? I know I'm better than that, so you must be.'

For a brief moment, Vorda stopped struggling.

'How?'

Ballack grinned through a barricade of teeth.

'Make them angry, get our guns from under the chieftain's boot.'

'If you betray me…' Vorda warned.

'Then we're dead anyway.'

They broke apart, Ballack making a show of thrusting the Templar back.

Arghuk had got to his feet. His voice rose above the clamour.

'My lads ain't 'appy. They want spleen and so do I!' The ork turned to one

of the minders. ‘Give ’em each a blade.’

Two rough-looking blades were tossed into the pit, ringing as they hit the ground: a crude axe and a rusty meat cleaver. The orks wanted them to literally butcher each other.

Ballack took the axe, as it was closest. The fight had shifted so they were side on to Arghuk’s throne. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the big ork was still on his feet, trying to rabble-rouse the others and prevent a riot. Some of the orks carried pistols, but none of them were currently armed. They were too engrossed in the fight, forgetting the nature of their prey.

Vorda had the cleaver. He gave it a few practise swings. Ballack saw some of greenskins emulating him with imagined blades of their own. Their mocking laughter boiled his blood.

‘Come on then,’ he whispered, and hoped the Templar upheld his side of the bargain.

Vorda ran at him, blade held high. The Templar was a better swordsman than that. It left him exposed to a counter, or it could have been a feint. Ballack had three short breaths to decide.

The axe felt heavy in his grip. Despite its crudity, it could cause some serious damage.

…They’ll kill who survives. Probably eat us both.

Ballack remembered his own words. Time to find out if he believed them.

Vorda came in hard and swinging. Ballack crouched down onto his knees with the axe held flat on the ground. He felt the pressure on his back as Vorda used it to vault.

Rising, Ballack heard Arghuk’s roar of anger merge into a desperate pained scream. The ork had a cleaver jutting from his neck, rammed there by a vengeful Templar.

It took a few seconds for the orks to realise what had happened, slow-witted despite their ostensible intelligence.

One of the minders dropped into the pit, reaching for a club instead of a gun.

Foolish…

Ballack seized its arms, halting the cudgel in mid-swing, and turned the ork into ablative armour as the solid shot sawed down into the pit. The minder jerked and shuddered as its back was threaded with slugs. Blood coughed up over Ballack’s chest and he dropped the beast, which was all

but shredded anyway.

Vorda had his blade and pistol, another dead ork at his feet. Arghuk was a cold corpse, near decapitated and slumped against his throne.

About to engage another greenskin, he shouted, ‘Take up your arms, Malevolent!’

A bolt pistol landed in the pit and Ballack swept it up. He took aim through the grate porthole, sighting the farthest barrel of fuel in the half dug tunnel… and fired.

The explosion was immense. The earth shook, thick chunks of rubble and cataracts of dust spilling from the tunnel roof. A heartbeat lapsed after the initial incendiary roar before giving birth to a firestorm that surged out of the excavated tunnel and into the area.

Vorda leapt off the ledge and thrust his body against the wall that faced the blast.

Ballack was already hunkered down, and gave him a knowing wink as their eyes met.

Most of the greenskins were too slow. Ballack saw several caught in the blast, hanging in the air as they tried too late to jump to safety, their bodies instantly aflame and seared black.

Flung corpses soared over Ballack’s head, furiously catapulted aloft as a tongue of fire speared through the porthole like a heavy flamer.

Crisp, burning greenskin meat turned the air inside the pit rancid.

Smoke choked everything.

An ork staggered through the grey cloud, lunging wildly.

Vorda left the wall and cut it down, two-handed, shoulder to hip. He impaled a second, piercing its sternum.

A deafening pistol burst killed another, flooding the smoke haze with muzzle flare as Ballack did his part.

Between them, they accounted for the twelve greenskins who had survived the explosion.

After Ballack finished the last, snapping a gretchin’s neck with a savage twist of his boot, Malevolent and Templar faced one another across a killing field.

‘You fought well,’ said Vorda, as the smoke began to dissipate. ‘That was an honourable deed, for us to join swords instead of lock them. I don’t know if I would have had enough temperance to do that.’

Ballack gave a hollow laugh. ‘Heh. Does this mean you don’t want to kill me anymore?’

He felt raw, and hardly in the mood for another fight, certainly not one against a Black Templar. If he had to, he would. Vorda had kicked the crate into the pit, scattering their weapons. Ballack’s chainsword was close.

He walked over to it slowly, grasped the hilt and felt some of his strength return.

Vorda hadn’t answered, and when Ballack looked up to find out why he saw the Templar bent over Tiamed’s blade.

It would be so easy. Thumb the ignition, stab him through his back. He was wounded. He’d be slow too.

Ballack raised the chainsword, his thumb over the stud.

He let it fall.

Enough treachery for one day, he thought.

Arghuk’s corpse was roasting somewhere above. He’d take the ork tusks and give them to Kastor, show he still had teeth.

Ballack smiled at that, turning his back on Vorda to go and claim his trophy.

‘In the crucible of battle, all grievances forgotten. Until we meet again, broth–’

The word stuck in Ballack’s throat at the same time Vorda drove Tiamed’s blade into his back. It pierced Ballack’s chest, tearing through the Malevolent’s heart.

‘No, brother,’ Vorda hissed in his ear, turning the hilt so it churned Ballack’s organs. ‘Now…’

‘You stabbed me… in the… back.’ Ballack could barely breathe, let alone speak.

‘Sacrificing honour, but avenging Tiamed,’ said Vorda, pushing the blade deeper.

‘Was it… worth it?’ Ballack croaked, spitting up flecks of blood.

‘Never, but at least you’ll be dead.’

The grains had almost run out for Ballack, but he smiled through his red-rimmed teeth as he uttered his final words.

‘Shame… Think I am beginning… to like you, Templar.’

Ballack laughed, spewing up more blood, and then hung there on Tiamed’s sword until Vorda wrenched it loose and left him amongst the other

mouldering dead.

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UNBROKEN

CHRIS WRAIGHT

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He runs, head low, bolter held loosely one-handed, loping over terrain broken by a mortal generation of war.

He moves faster than should be possible, his steel-grey armour a blur in the desert sand, whining from servo-strain, driven to its limits by the hunter's mind encased within. He is a dust-cloud, a djinn of vengeance launched across the parched wastes.

The world around him howls its outrage. The skies crack with flame, throbbing amid tumbling amber cloudbanks. Every footfall is a violation, an imposition of alien matter on tortured soil.

This world hates him. It hates his armour, forged on a planet of relentless cold. It hates the angular runes on his shoulderguards, carved in black and choked with the dust that fouls all things here. It hates the fact that he is alone, for Armageddon is a world of limitless hosts, of Legions stretching from lightning-scored horizon to horizon. As he runs, this world tries to throttle him, to snatch away his breath, to seize him up.

He feeds from the hatred. He looks up at the ember-glowing skies and laughs. He feels the beating heat on his back and snarls for more. Blood-red flickers dance across the western desert-edge, and the incipient storm-rumble makes the dust shiver.

He is panting now, his saliva viscous. He has been running for hours, a constant rhythm since being dropped into the deep desert by the lifter. Ahead of him squats the ridge, carved like bone from the desert, crested, wave-like and dominating the surrounding flatlands. It rises two hundred metres, jagged and earth-dry, scored by gulches that will never gush with

water again.

He sees the summit, zoomed through his helm's ocular augmenters, beaten flat and crested with withered scrub. The peak is the target. It is the stronghold, a citadel, a natural fortress of bare stone and wind-flayed columns amid the baking expanse of desert. Xenos-cattle would break against that rock like spilled blood, foaming back into the gasping earth in their anger. He intends to make them.

He grins and pants harder, dog-like. He can hear them coming for him now. They have picked up his spoor, and they are breaking away from their pits and towers along the river's edge, a kilometre to the east. He can already see them in his mind's eye – roaring, stamping, furious. They will come for him, racing across the sands, desperate to bring him down, to crush his spine and trample his lifeless body into the red soil.

The thought of it makes his battle-spirit sing. He feels his axe clatter against his thigh as he runs and burns to pull it free.

Not yet, he thinks. Not until they are on him, piling in around him, bellowing with tusked mouths gaping and spittle flying into his face.

He runs. He keeps running. But though he is the prey, he is not running from them. He has never run from an enemy in his life.

The dust flares around him, curling like a cloak. The skies burn, the heat shimmers.

Ahead of him, the summit nears. It looks, for a moment, like a cairn on the peaks of Asaheim.

'What was his name?'

Regimental Commander Holth vol Vergion is not good with names. He is capable of recalling and deploying complex deployment orders with precision, but names pass over him now – the living and the dead, for there have been so many.

Commissar Ferd Naghro does not miss a beat, staring through the aperture of his long-range magnoculars with the squint that always marks his jowly face. 'Svein,' says Naghro. 'He called himself Svein Last-of-Eight.'

Vergion grunts. His narrow chin is lined with sweat already, and it is less than an hour after the red-glow dawn. He can feel the dust rising, settling, filtering, worming its way into every crevice. 'What does it mean?'

Naghro puts the magnoculars down. 'His squad is gone,' he says. 'He is

the remaining warrior.’

‘They could reinforce him?’

‘They won’t.’ Naghro looks sourly approving.

All around the two men, fumes churn into the toxic sludge of Armageddon’s atmosphere. Columns of Chimera transports sway through the dust, gouging out long track-lines as their smoke-stacks belch soot. A flight of Valkyrie gunships powers overhead, hanging low, their hunched wings heavy with weaponry. Ranks of mustard-yellow troopers trudge through the swirling dust-clouds, wet cloths draped over their rebreather masks, all heading for the remaining transports that will take them, once again, over the killing grounds of the inter-hive badlands.

The regiment’s command group has pulled up ahead of the mustering vanguard, positioned on a scrubby rise to watch the muster complete. The 172nd are getting good at it now. They have been on the move on and off for seven months, and it is hard to remember sleeping on something that isn’t mobile. Naghro’s Salamander transport idles halfway down the slope, a little lower than Vergion’s Crassus super-heavy command vehicle. The company commanders have already taken their positions at the head of the columns – Kallack leading the Tauros and attack-bike flanking squads; Vervis, Helt, Celif and Llom commanding the main mechanised infantry battalions; Jeherren and Gorghi leading the pure tank columns – Leman Russ, Hellhounds and a few surviving Wyvern suppression units, though those units have taken a beating on the crossing from Acheron into the contested zones.

Vergion notes, with some satisfaction, that Naghro seems content with progress. He hasn’t launched into one of his frothing rages, nor has he dragged his Commissariat staff down the front line to berate the men for slovenliness. For once, he seems to be in accord with the spirit of the regiment.

For his own part, Vergion feels that mix of trepidation and enthusiasm he always does before a major action. This is a significant push, one that holds the promise of securing the desert south of the last remaining rok fortress and cutting off reinforcements to the beleaguered ork offensive positions. It has been weeks in the preparation, and resources have been pulled from five other fronts to lend it heft. Get it right, and they will blood the greenskins badly. Get it wrong, and they’ll be hauling burned-out tank carcasses from

the sand for years. It all depends on taking the objective and holding it.

He feels the dust on his lips, and licks them. Everything tastes of grit, oil and blood.

‘How far away is he?’ Vergion asks.

‘Already close,’ says Naghro, snapping his magnocular case closed. ‘I should take my place now, commander.’

Vergion takes a final look around him, and at the multiple ranks of armour, all gouging its way into the desert, overflown by Valkyries and Avengers. It is a formidable battle-group, war-hardened and brutally drilled. He thinks of Svein Last-of-Eight, out in the deep desert, alone.

‘Then we are being outpaced,’ Vergion replies, trudging to the open crew-hatch of his Crassus command vehicle. ‘That will be rectified. Now move out.’

He smells them before he sees them. The ridge is still three kilometres to the north, and unprotected. They burn up from the east, out of the river’s jagged gulch, aiming to cut him off. Their stench rolls ahead of them – a fungal fog, hot and clotted with sweat-wet dust. Next come the clouds, kicked up by hundreds of trampling boots, churning like frothing *mjod* in the barrel. They are panting, bawling, jostling like the animals they are, latching onto his own scent and seeking him out.

Svein keeps running. He wants to make the first broken rock-edge before they reach him, and that will be tight.

Lactic acid is already burning in his thighs, and the pain spurs him on. Both hearts are thudding in a tight rhythm; his lungs are straining and his skin is tight with sweat under his armour. His whole body is a machine now, speeding, locked to the drumbeat of the chase, tight as cured hide.

He remembers running through the snowdrifts on his home world, hunting down prey in the years before he’d been taken, his skin open to the cut of the wind and his nostrils flaring with the unfiltered scents of pine and stone. He remembers the old pains of his body before the changes were wrought, and they are much the same now. He remembers how he would use his mind’s eye to chart the course of the prey before him, placing himself in its position, judging where it would run and angling his pursuit in order to cut it off. He wonders if the xenos can do the same. They have been cunning in the past. They have laid low hive-spires and brought ruin to whole tracts of

this world.

They are only here to slaughter. On the one hand, he despises that – he cannot help it, it is bred into him, and he loathes the greenskin more than he loathes any other living thing he has fought. On the other, he recognises the purity in it. They are the same as him – made to kill, bled clean of remorse or fear, their minds set on the target as tight as docking clamps.

He sees the first of them, clear of the river now, charging across the flat-beaten earth. Those are the fastest, not the biggest, and they will die quickly. They know this too, but they sprint after him nevertheless, blind with their species-rage, seeing only his blood-trampled demise in their stimm-flared brains.

You will have to fight for it, he thinks, opening fire with his bolter, sending the shells streaking out across the desert. The first xenos fall, crashing to the ground, rolling over and over with momentum, leapt over by those behind.

It is a plunging wave – a tsunami of bodies, crashing across the gasping, forge-hot land. It will overtake him.

Svein looks up. The rise is close now. He tears towards it, firing all the while. The ammo-counter clicks down to empty, and he slams another clip home, never breaking stride. They are sending runners to outflank him, bringing up the heavy warriors through the centre of the horde. They disregard the mass-reactive shells that slam into them, wrenching and catapulting them from their feet. Some get back up, carrying huge wounds but still roaring their fury, powering awkwardly back into the hunt.

He admires that. He wishes to kill those ones cleanly.

How many are after him now? Two hundred? Five hundred? A thousand?

Vergion, positioned further still to the east, between the orks and Acheron, will be on the move now. His tanks will already be rumbling across the wastes. Svein remembers Vergion. He liked the mortal commander, and he liked his commissar even more. They both looked him in the eye and did not insult him with honorifics. They treated him like a soldier, which is what he is, and he hopes he did the same. It can be hard not to belittle the mortals, despite all they have done. He hopes he did not do that.

He hopes, too, they will be on time. Vergion had the look of a man who would keep his promises.

The xenos keep closing, spilling over the ash like rats. Their guttural language is audible now, hurling out bestial hatreds. He admires that, likes

the spirit it shows, but he keeps his own mouth closed. His own death-curses can wait.

He keeps firing, running down another clip until it clangs empty and replaces it again. He keeps running.

Ahead of him, the ridge looms up, blocking the light of the sun.

The 172nd surges across the badlands, all men now encased in their vehicles. Vergion's command group manoeuvres into the centre of the formation, flanked by two mechanised infantry divisions. They spread out across the burning earth, adopting the standard Astra Militarum convoy pattern: heavy armour in the centre, artillery pieces at the rear, light units on the flanks and scout bikes up ahead.

Vergion holds on to the shuddering chassis of the Crassus, peering into the tactical picter. All around him his crew shout and sweat and work, keeping the armoured behemoth on the route. The whole structure shakes as the tracks labour. Armageddon is a hateful world to wage war on – the soils crumble under weight, the heat is crushing and the electric storms scramble the augurs. The planet is an enemy just as formidable as the hated xenos.

The carrier jolts, slamming Vergion into the inner wall of his command chamber. He curses and rights himself, feeling the hot trickle of blood down his temple.

The Space Wolf has covered so much ground that Vergion's columns will have to work hard to meet the schedule. That is absurd – a whole regiment, powered by huge promethium and diesel engines, struggling to match the pace set by a single warrior. But then Vergion has seen the Space Marines fight, and knows what they are capable of. He has seen lone members of the Adeptus Astartes cut their way through whole mobs of heavy-armoured xenos, fighting with such speed and discipline that it has lifted the populaces of the spires to new heights of heroism.

He cannot be cynical about them, not like some of his envious peers. Vergion knows he has done his duty by the Emperor, but also knows that it will never compare to that performed by the lowliest of the Angels on Armageddon. How could it? Within their sacred bodies they carry a fractional spark of the Emperor's own essence.

'They are like unto the gods themselves,' Vergion mouths to himself, watching the kilometres click by. 'They are the instruments of our Protector.

They are perfect, unwearied and unsullied.’

In the west, he sees the first signs of the xenos horde on the scopes. Its size does not surprise him – the greenskins know the value of the objective and are there in force. He sees the first flickers of the augur readings, signifying movements and deployments. As usual, it is a scattered mess.

But they are already charging. They are already making for the target. It is all happening so fast.

‘Signal the forward units,’ voxes Vergion, glancing at the chrono and not liking what he sees. ‘Break two points south – we are coming in high.’

He can adjust, he can nudge, but in truth all has been set in train now. He will have to hope, and trust, that it has been enough.

Vergion looks back into the scopes, his fingers turning white with tension where they clutch the metal housing.

The ridge beckons. It rears up, veined with ochre, a great fold in the cracked earth, worn down by fire-laced winds into folds of sandstone. He vaults up the first boulders, leaping from one to another, but then they are on him.

They clutch at his ankles, still scrabbling as he blasts at them. Blood splatters up his greaves, but still they come. He climbs faster, racing up the crooked defile, using his free hand to power between the steepening rockfaces. They adopt the same tactic, grabbing any handhold, hauling their stinking bodies after his. The scrawniest of them scampers ahead, trying to power past him before he reaches the summit. The brawniest are still far behind, hampered by iron-plate armour, but now catching fast.

Svein pushes on. Solid rounds explode around him, showering his shoulders with rubble. The gun-carriers are close enough to fire now, and the heavy ammunition pulverises the stone. He darts and weaves, belying his ceramite bulk to power upwards, defying gravity, using every handgrip and foothold.

He reaches a ledge and half turns, emptying his bolter into the oncoming herds. In that moment, he sees them all before him, streaming up from the desert floor, and his hearts spike with exhilaration. They are *massive*. They are *unending*. They clamber over their own dead, low-slung jaws dribbling with gore-flecked saliva. He sees the greater xenos-beasts lumbering towards him, shoving lesser creatures aside with claws of rusting steel. He sees goggled fanatics lowering flamers, and augmetic pistoned horrors

limping unsteadily into range.

‘*Fenrys*!’ he roars, as the last shell cracks from his bolter’s barrel.

He has already carved a swathe of blood, and it makes him savagely glad. The same xenos-breed took his pack down, one by one, during the months of relentless fighting on Armageddon – in Acheron, in the wastes and in the void above the fiery curve of the cursed planet’s atmosphere. Each of his brothers slaughtered hundreds before the end, and Svein is honour-bound to exact the same tally.

He starts moving again and mag-locks his empty bolter, for this is no place to make a stand. The bullets whizz past him, scraping the edges of his armour. He is struck, and his armour takes the impact. They almost catch his trailing leg, but he surges up faster. As he climbs, he reaches for his axe and pulls it clear. He is leading them up, up, up – pulling the whole horde from the plains and into the heights.

They hit him again, and he stumbles. His footing slips, and he slashes down hard with the axe, taking off a xenos’s claws at the wrist. It is the first blade-kill, and he grunts with the release. He crests a rock-shelf, no more than a metre wide, and plants his boots firmly for the first time in hours.

They clamber up to fight him and he obliges. He exchanges blows with inch-thick metal cleavers, whirring chainswords, mauls, flails and snub-barrelled rifles. They crash against him, and he kicks them back to the desert floor. The blows are vicious, heavy as pig-iron. The sandstone explodes into clouds around them, wreathing the furious combat in a cloak of swirling translucence. He takes wounds, for they are warrior-born just as he is. His armour is dented and scored, and he is knocked against the stone wall at his back, but his vision is better than theirs and he is still faster and more skilful, and he uses those advantages. His axe flies a fraction faster, a fraction tighter and a fraction harder. He kills dozens, then dozens more, and their bodies crunch and break away from him. Black blood paints the stone in streaks, staining like engine oil.

They waver. The momentum of the tide flickers, and he sees the damage he has already done.

He angles his axe down at them, fangs bared under the death-snarl of his helm.

‘One-of-Eight!’ he roars in Fenrisian, not caring that they will not understand him. He is not speaking to them anyway. They roar back,

goaded, and surge up the slope again, galloping on all-fours now. He sees more greenskins rumbling across the dust-filmed desert below, disgorged by juggernauts and half-tracks.

Then he springs back up the cliff-face, climbing rapidly. He looks up and sees the furnace of the sky sweep across his visual field. It is scored with the dirty trails of mortars, and that gives him satisfaction.

Vergion must be close. The beat of engines is on the edge of his hearing.

He keeps moving. They come after him. There is nowhere left to go, and ahead of him the summit rises.

Vergion gives the order. The tanks grind to a halt, churning up sand, rocking with inertia even as their gunners angle the long barrels. They are performing the calculations quickly, for much has already been pre-cogitated. The ork defence lines of the river-course are less than a kilometre ahead now. The xenos themselves are massed and out in the open, vulnerable to close-packed fire. The summit of the ridge looms beyond them, hazy from dust.

The tanks shoot high, sending cluster-bombs, mortars and infantry-shredding shrapnel charges arcing into the greenskin positions. The sky goes black with discharge, masking the red light of Armageddon's angry star. More tank formations reach their coordinates, and the punishment becomes withering. Shells slam from the sky, pounding the desert, annihilating all under its devastating curtain.

The troop transports advance under the cover of the tank-barrage, trusting in the spotters to keep the cascade well ahead of them. Vergion orders the Crassus to follow them in. He climbs the ladder to the observation hatch, unlocks it and pushes out into the open. Even though he wears a full-face helm and rebreather, the heat and the noise hit him hard. He reels, gripping the circular rim, gaining his bearings.

Everything stinks of cordite and promethium. The sky has gone, replaced by the roaring trails of projectile fire. The shells hammer along the route of the dry river, still a long way from the high-point and sweeping west in a grinding, disciplined movement.

Vergion spies Naghro's Salamander powering its way towards the very front, and smiles – the commissar would not be anywhere else. Behind the black-clad vehicle are the lead Chimeras, already reaching their deployment

coordinates. Vergion sees them skid to a halt, their crew-doors slamming open and troopers spilling from the interior onto the sand. They form into squads – the lasgun-bearing main assault squads moving forward and supported moments later by the heavy-weapons teams. Vergion sees the mortars being unloaded, assembled and loaded, ready to add to the barrage from the battle tanks.

It is assault in the best tradition of the Legion – fast, overwhelming, rapidly escalating as the forces are delivered to the pre-arranged fire-bases. Ranks of unloaded troopers advance through the smoke-filled landscape, firing whicker-sharp volleys of lasbeams through the murk, their helm-lumens glowing in the artificial dusk.

The orks come back at them – of course they do – for even the opening barrage has not killed all of them. They stumble out of the nerve-shredding hellstorm, half-blinded. The counter-strike is furious. Vergion sees huge greenskin warriors blasted apart by grenade-strikes, sliced into blood-whirl shards by concentrated lasfire and pulverised by mortar-fall. Still, more crash into contact. They are bewildered now, shocked into a kind of feral rage by the hammer blow of the assault, but still they do what comes naturally to them – fight, fight, fight.

The second wave of infantry carriers pushes on, aiming to reach the river-course before resistance can be fully organised. The rain of artillery sweeps ahead of them, smashing apart trench lines and barricades in a rolling fire-tide.

‘Where is he?’ demands Vergion, speaking to his augur-operator.

The reply comes back over the unit-comm, crackly and distorted. ‘Tracking movement toward the summit. He’s still fighting.’

‘Throne of Earth,’ breathes Vergion, relieved. ‘Push on, then. Push *on*.’

The air around him burns, igniting with the tang of spilled promethium. Everything is a death-marker – the smells, the sounds and the throbbing earth. He is at the epicentre now, orchestrating the close-packed fury of his regiment.

They approach the river. To the west, partly hidden by the clouds of smoke, the summit still stands, sundered and raging in visual range.

He is nearly ended before making the horn-curve peak. They are firing again, launching crude explosives from shoulder-mounted tubes, trying to

blast him clear from the rock, to drag him down where they can hack him to slivers.

He darts to one side, warned by preternatural hunt-sense. The cliff-face he had been aiming for disappears in a riot of falling stone; flying boulders smash against his armour. He reels, nearly losing his grip, but manages to keep climbing. More projectiles strike his back, punching into the ravaged ceramite.

He reaches the lip of stone before the summit and grabs it with both fists, hauling himself over the edge. The flat of the peak runs away before him, the high-point amidst the flatness, its red-brown surface scoured by dust-winds.

They follow him over like rats up a hawser and crash into him – a solid mass of green flesh, encased in motley armour and bearing improvised weapons. A dozen, then two dozen, then more, throwing themselves wildly.

He fights back, matching their savagery. His axe is wielded two-handed, hurled around in baresark curves. He decapitates a broken-toothed monster and bisects the chest of a roaring opponent. Blood flecks, spurts and swings around him in hanging trails. He kicks out, breaking bones. One xenos gets close, and he head-butts it, snapping the thick fore-skull, before finishing it with the axe-edge.

They land their own blows. His greaves are cracked now, half-shattered by the solid rounds that slam in all the time. His right hand leaks hot blood under its gauntlet, and there is no time to heal it. His breastplate is dented, pressed against his labouring chest, and his arms burn with the raw pain of overexertion. Every indicator in his helm flashes blood-red, screaming at him to stop, to pull out, to get away.

He cannot. He will not. He is Svein, Last-of-Eight, a Lone Wolf. He has a task to fulfil.

They come again. The axe bites, tearing up alien flesh in hot slices. He makes the killing-edge fly, propelling it one-handed again and punching with his free fist, cracking bone and ripping muscle. The xenos blur into a screen of blood and fury, surrounding and rearing over him, poised like a wave of the grey-white seas of home, ready to tear him from the ridge and cast him into oblivion.

He forgets everything but the combat. He forgets his old pack, his old missions, the orders that brought him to Armageddon. All he has is the

physical test – pitiless, furious, pure. If he had any spare breath in his lungs he would cry out for the pleasure and glory of it, for this is *fighting*, as elemental and unrestrained as he has always dreamed of. He is no longer an individual, but a force, as torrential as the Helwinter.

He swings round, clearing a space ahead of him. A red-eyed xenos collapses back in its agony, knocking others down, breaking the unity of the tide before him. In a fraction of a second, he looks up, out across the plains, aware again of a world outside the circuit of his axe-strikes.

He sees the dry river far below, skirting around the eastern edge of the ridge and snaking out into the ash-wastes. He sees the smoke rising from the artillery bombardment, and the vehicles tearing across the divide. Vergion is on schedule. The mortal has kept his promise.

Svein smiles, but there is no time for that any more. In that fraction of a pause, he realises how damaged he is. Every muscle of his augmented body is shrieking at him. His carapace is broken in three places. The bones of his left hand are broken. He has a fractured skull, the flesh over his ribcage is torn, and his right boot is filling with blood.

Then they run at him again, thundering in their fractured, overlapping mania.

He grips his axe, judges where to hit first, and strikes back hard.

The 172nd charges through the greenskin positions on the far side of the riverbank, storming them in waves of tight, ordered violence. They take the dens one by one, hurling in grenades, launching flamers through the sight-holes, then blasting the doors open and sending troopers in. These positions have been occupied for a long time, and the xenos are dug-in, but it does not help them. The assault is overwhelming, the numbers telling, the speed more than they can handle.

Valkyries swoop in low, engines whining, launching their attack runs and strafing the guntowers and the greenskins that are still above ground. The artillery barrage has now moved on, freeing up the infantry to tear through the heart of the xenos strongholds along the banks. They place charges against the tangled walls of scrap and looted masonry, and blow the defence-lines into rubble. Then they storm the smouldering remnants, bringing pain to the enemy that has given them so much pain of its own.

It feels good to return it. It feels good to torch their lairs and make them

squeal.

Vergion's Crassus smashes through a half-severed line of razorwire, and thunders to a shuddering halt. The commander adjusts his rebreather, slams opens the hatch, and steps out on the earth again, flanked by his bodyguards. As his boots touch down on the ash, he takes in the situation with his own eyes.

They have taken the shoreline positions. They have driven the greenskins from their defensive redoubts and now occupy in force. With the xenos artillery points negated, they will be able to send in landers within the hour. Aegis lines will be constructed, making the dry river-course into a fortress. The orks will be denied passage towards Acheron along the protected way, leaving them only the open desert, where they will be vulnerable to airstrikes and detectable by the hive's functioning augur arrays.

Objective achieved.

He allows himself a twinge of guilt, though he knows none should be forthcoming. Naghro would have chastised him for it. The plan was the Space Wolf's – he had proposed it, back in the bunker with his thick finger jabbing at points on the tactical hololith.

'I draw them out,' he'd said in his accented Gothic. 'I pull them from the river. Then you take it.'

Vergion had hesitated. Even the commissar had hesitated.

'And then?' he had asked.

The Space Wolf had never replied, but the smile he'd given had made Vergion shiver.

Vergion looks up, westward. He can see the summit before him, bordering the deep wastes. It is crawling with greenskins, all surging up the precipitous cliffs, seemingly oblivious to the destruction wrought on their stronghold. They have been goaded and they have responded, pursuing their prey with such single-minded obsession that they have allowed themselves to be destroyed by it.

Even now, Vergion wonders if he can alter the arrangement. Perhaps the Valkyries could be re-routed, clearing the summit of xenos. He could call in assault-troops, delivered in airborne carriers, and try to pull the Space Wolf back before he is lost. The value of one such warrior is beyond price – as he has shown by dragging the orks out of their entrenched positions and enabling the 172nd to overrun them with such crushing speed.

As he looks up at the summit, Naghro’s Salamander draws up alongside him. The commissar dismounts and limps over.

‘Do not think about it,’ he says. ‘This is the priority.’

Vergion smiles coldly. ‘You’re right,’ he says. ‘Though I regret it.’

‘I think he wished for it.’

Vergion does not believe that. He stands up straight, guessing the gesture will never be seen, but some things have to be marked.

He salutes, slamming his clenched fist against his chest, acknowledging the lone warrior on the ridge who has pulled the greenskins from their lairs and given him his victory. He will not cheapen that sacrifice by altering the plans now. He will hammer the remainder into the dust, and fortify the lines, making them so strong that when the xenos on the summit limp back with blood on their claws they will be cut to pieces by his newly-fixed guns.

This is his stronghold now. He will make it unbreakable.

Svein sees the salute. Before the horde closes around him again, he sees the tiny outline of Vergion against the sand, marking the sacrifice.

Then the blows come in again, harder now that the xenos are on the flat, pressing in, frustrated by his survival. If they have realised what their hunt has cost them, they give no sign – they are obsessed, focused only on the kill, roused to a frenzy. Their bloodlust has damned them, just as he promised the mortal commander it would.

He fights again, knowing that this will be the end. There are dozens already pressing on him. Soon there will be hundreds and he will kill until the sun turns black. But it will not be enough – a blade will find its way through, a claw will penetrate, a shell will find its mark.

He does not grieve. He has slain more this day than ever before, and this is the manner of a warrior’s passing – surrounded by heaps of the slain, his axe-blade red, his voice hoarse from death-curses. This is how he has always envisioned it.

He fights on. In his mind’s eye, he hears the laughter of Russ at his back.

He fights on. He feels the ice-wind in his plaited hair, the cold edge that stirs his hearts to fervour.

He fights on. In his amber eyes there is something like ecstasy.

Dragons, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

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THE RELIC

JONATHAN GREEN

OceanofPDF.com

The horde spread across the unsullied blue-white wilderness of the ice fields like an oily black stain. Filthy clouds of greasy smoke rose from the exhausts of fossil fuel-guzzling machines, sending sooty trails into the frozen air to mark their passing. Every warbike and cobbled-together trukk left a petrochemical smear across both land and sky behind it, marking the horde's progress across the polar wilderness as another region of the planet fell to the furious predations of the alien invaders.

An unstoppable tide of savage, growling machinery poured out across the riven glacier. Before it, still a league or more away, the stalwart line of armour that the Emperor's chosen had decreed would not be breached approached. Today – at this time and in this place, amidst the desolate ice fields of the Dead Lands of Armageddon – the Astartes would make their stand against the green tide.

Warbike outriders gunned their throttles excitedly, while those boyz clinging to the sides of guntrukks, wartrakks and battlewagons cannibalised from captured vehicles of Imperial design fired off round after round from their heavy calibre shootas in their overeagerness to engage with the enemy.

The drop pod fell from heaven like the wrath of the Emperor Himself. The force of its landing sent shuddering tremors through the iron-hard ice sheet, a network of treacherous crevasses fracturing outwards from the point of impact.

The echoing gunshot retort of the pod's landing still rumbling across the fractured face of the glacier, the armoured landing craft opened and from it emerged the instrument of the Emperor's holy vengeance.

Autoloaders clattered into operation as the barrels of an assault cannon noisily cycled up to speed. The four blunt digits of a huge robotic fist, easily large enough to crush an ork's skull, flexed and whirred, servo-motors in each finger giving it a crushing force equal to that exerted by a crawling glacier.

With heavy, pistoning steps, the revered Dreadnought emerged from the cocoon of its drop pod, some monstrous metal beetle birthing from its adamantium shell, roused and ready for war.

Bio-linked sensors scanned the rapidly-advancing line of greenskin vehicles, the Dreadnought's machine-spirit-merged sentience processing the constant stream of information – everything from average velocities to weapon capabilities to wind shear – and waited. Experience won on a thousand battlefields across a hundred worlds – including this Emperor-forsaken rock in particular – came into play, recalled from the depths of mind-linked implants. The orks weren't going anywhere. He could afford to be patient. Revenge was a dish served best cold, after all.

Heavy munitions fire chewed the frozen ground in front of him. The foul xenos had seen him fall from the heavens on wings of fire like some avenging angel and now that he was in their sights they were directing everything in their crude arsenal directly at him.

Shells threw chips of ice the size of Predator shells from the bullet-pitted surface of the glacier, many raining back down to strike against the Dreadnought's ancient adamantium armour. It had stood up to much worse over the centuries. The ice shards shattered harmlessly against its hull, some exploding into powder.

As the orks drew closer still and their haphazard targeting devices found their range at last, the greenskins let fly with rockets, high calibre shells and even smoky flamethrowers in their eagerness to engage with the ancient.

The Dreadnought disappeared amidst clouds of sooty smoke and roiling flames, the glacier reverberating now to the explosions and impacts of the orks' weapons which were, in general, noisy and heavy on the pyrotechnics, but not all that accurate or effective.

And all the time the ork line surged forwards, steadily closing on the Dreadnought's position.

Preceded by a torrent of cannon and bolter fire, the Dreadnought stepped from the smoke of its supposed destruction, swivelling about its waist axis,

raking the hurtling ork vehicles with its arm-mounted weapons. The standard that hung from its banner-pole was scorched black and still smouldering at the edges, the halo of iron spikes surmounting its armoured body glowing orange in the oily flames lapping at its pockmarked hull.

Three times the height of a man, larger than many of the ork machines and as heavy as a warbuggy, armoured with adamantium plates and carrying an arsenal that rivalled the firepower of a battlewagon, it would take more than that to halt this juggernaut's advance.

It took the Dreadnought's symbiotic machine-spirit mere nanoseconds to divine the ancient's position relative to the speeding ork vehicles and select a succession of suitable targets. The Dreadnought opened up with its assault cannon and storm bolter again, a hail of hard shells reaping their own whirlwind of death and destruction.

'Death to the invaders!' Brother Jarold of the Black Templars Solemnus Crusade bellowed, his augmented voice booming from vox-casters built into his Dreadnought body-shell. What little of him that was still flesh and blood spasmed in fury, thrashing and sloshing within the amniotic fluids of his sarcophagus-tank. 'Cleanse this place of the xenos taint, in the name of the primarch and the Emperor. Death to the defilers of Armageddon!'

The squadron of warbikes leading the Kult of Speed in its attack was the first to taste his wrath. Burning rubber shredded under the attention of the Dreadnought's assault cannon, sending several bikes and their riders cart-wheeling over the ice, as sheared axles and wheel-less spokes stabbed into the ice, flipping the screaming machines through the air to land in broken piles upon the iron-hard glacier.

Those orks unfortunate enough to land at Jarold's feet had limbs and skulls crushed beneath his relentless, pounding footfalls.

A burst of storm bolter fire found a promethium barrel lashed to the side of wartrakk. The fuel inside touched off, blowing the vehicle apart, spreading pieces of wartrakk up to twenty-five metres away across the ice field.

With a series of hollow pops, the rocket launchers arrayed across the Dreadnought's broad shoulders sent a fusillade of mortar shells arcing into the pack of vehicles behind the disintegrating line of warbikes.

Unable to stop in time, some of the ork bikes skidded past the Dreadnought, and having already missed one target chose instead to rev their engines and plough on towards the advancing line of Astartes armour.

Three bikes crashed and burned as Brother Jarold's weapons-fire took them down, and just as many again collided with the wrecked vehicles.

Many of the ork drivers were horrified to discover that the Dreadnought still stood after their concerted bombardment of it, and swerved at the last moment to avoid the immovable hulk. But one wasn't quick enough and cleared the choking exhaust trail of another bike to find itself directly on top of the Dreadnought.

The warbike hit Brother Jarold with the force of an ork rokkit. Even as the bike hit him, Jarold grabbed hold of it with his huge power fist, the vehicle swinging up into the air in his grasp as its momentum spun them both around. The ork rider was still clinging to the wide handlebars when a direct hit from Brother Jarold's storm bolter ignited the contents of the bike's fuel tank, as he released the vehicle at the height of its rising arc. The bike spun through the air above him and became a fiery comet, annihilating another ork rider that was rounding on the Dreadnought as the bike crashed back down to earth.

The Dreadnought's deep strike insertion and deadly combination of cannon and bolter fire had decimated the front line of the ork Speed Freeks. And all the while, unheard over the roar of bike and trukk, assault cannon and bolter, as well as the concussive booms of fuel-tank explosions, Brother Jarold called down the wrath of the Emperor and His primarchs on the heads of the xenos filth.

The promethium roar of crude ork engines was joined by the well-tuned growl of the superior Astartes armour as the bikes of the Black Templars' rapid deployment force and its supporting Land Speeder squadron closed on the drop-pod's homing beacon.

If the orks had been surprised by the fury of the Dreadnought's initial attack, it proved to be only a foretaste of what was to come as Ansgar's Avengers – the strike force mustered in memory of the fallen Emperor's Champion – engaged the enemy.

Clouds of bittersweet incense swirled and ascended into the vault of the battle-chapel, filling the cathedral space with a sparkling aromatic mist. Shapes swam in and out of the constantly shifting vapours, giving glimpses of fluted columns a hundred metres tall, skull and cross adorned buttresses and statues commemorating the fallen of the Chapter.

The skull-set glow-globes had been dimmed and the forests of candles were in the process of being snuffed out by a trundling cenobyte servitor while its partner, following on behind, proceeded to trim their wicks and clear away the crusted wax that coated the black iron candelabra, like a series of frozen cataracts.

The sound of the pitted oak doors opening – the doors so old now the wood was black – resounded throughout the battle-chapel like the boom of distant gunfire. Chaplain Wolfram opened his eyes, finishing the prayer that was on his lips. He rose to standing from where he had been kneeling before the Solemnus Shrine, his eyes falling once again upon the empty indentations where the Black Sword, the Champion's laurel-wreathed helm and the lovingly ornamented Armour of Faith should have lain.

Wolfram turned, one armoured hand – every knuckle of the gauntlet embossed with the Templars' black cross and white skull insignia, a permanent memento mori to the one charged with watching over the souls of the crusaders – closing around the haft of his crozius arcanum. The ancient artefact was both a Chaplain's badge of office and a potent weapon in its own right. A disruptor generator was concealed within the wooden shaft of the relic, that one simple addition turning the flared blades of the Templar cross that surmounted it into a lethal power axe.

The sound of echoing footfalls on the stone-flagged floor of the cathedral space carried to the Chaplain through the muffling clouds rising from the glowing nuggets of flame-flecked incense smouldering within their braziers. Chaplain Wolfram relaxed his grip on his crozius.

The booming footsteps came closer, the incense smoke parting as a colossal shape, that was neither man nor machine but something of both, something greater than either, stepped into the light of the candles that guttered in the breeze of its advance.

Wolfram noted the battle-damaged banner pole and the deeply etched gothic lettering upon the Dreadnought's hull and bowed.

'In the name of Him Enthroned on Holy Terra, well met, Brother Jarold,' he said. 'And what brings you to this place of sanctuary, still an hour from matins?'

'May the Emperor's blessings be upon you, Brother-Chaplain,' the machine-tempered voice of the ancient responded.

'You are not slumbering with your brother Dreadnoughts aboard

Forgeship Goliath*?’*

‘Now is not the time for rest.’

‘But our recent endeavours on Armageddon have cost us dear,’ the Chaplain warned. ‘Rest is what is needed now.’

‘I cannot sleep, brother, not when there is still so much of His holy work left undone. And besides, I have slept for long enough already.’

‘Then what can I do for you, brother?’ the Chaplain asked.

‘I would seek your counsel,’ the Dreadnought said in a voice like the slamming of sepulchre doors.

‘From me, brother?’ Wolfram asked, caught off guard for a moment by Brother Jarold’s honesty. Ancients were usually the ones who shared their hard-won wisdom with the rest of the Chapter; they were not the ones who came seeking it from others. ‘You are troubled?’

‘Yes, I am troubled, Brother-Chaplain.’ The Dreadnought broke off.

‘Speak, brother. You have nothing to feel ashamed of.’

‘But I do.’

‘I see. You speak of the loss of Brother Ansgar.’

‘I do, brother. When the Emperor’s chosen one needed me most, I was found wanting.’

‘You have prayed about this?’

‘I have sat in penitent vigil ever since my return to the fleet. I have thought on Brother Ansgar’s fate and nothing else.’

‘I too have spent time in prayer and contemplation on the same matter,’ Wolfram admitted.

‘You have, brother?’

‘I have. You cannot blame yourself for what happened. Blame the beast, the heretic xenos that blight the world below still. Purge yourself of your guilt in the crucible of war. Smite the xenos with bolter and fist and cannon, all in the name of vengeance. Use the rage that the Emperor has placed within your soul to bring down His wrath upon the greenskin. Show no remorse. Show the alien no pity and you will have nothing to fear.’

Silence descended between Chaplain and Dreadnought as the latter considered the former’s words.

‘So you believe that this is all part of some greater plan? His divine plan for Armageddon? For our crusade? For me?’

‘I do not know, Brother Jarold,’ Wolfram admitted with a shake of his

head, 'but what I do know is that no one has come forward since to take on the mantle of champion, having received His divine inspiration, and there are plenty who would be ready for such a role.'

'So you believe Brother Ansgar is still alive.' The Dreadnought's augmented voice suddenly sounded strangely like that of a young petitioner, yet to be admitted to the brotherhood, desperate for reassurance.

'That is what I know. Somewhere, and perhaps only barely, but the Emperor would not leave us without a source of inspiration to lead us at a time such as this, with the conflict to decide the fate of this world still - raging around us. And Brother Ansgar does not have to fight alongside us to inspire we of the Solemnus Crusade to great deeds.'

Incense-smoke coiled about the motionless form of the monolithic Dreadnought. When Brother Jarold spoke again, the vibrations of his vox-casters sent ripples through the curling smoke, creating new eddying patterns within it.

'Then my course is plain,' he said.

Chaplain Wolfram looked up at the scrollwork decorations of Jarold's Dreadnought-locked sarcophagus.

'This day I vow that I shall not rest until Brother Ansgar has been found and we bear him back in triumph, or that we might lay his body to rest and reclaim the relics of our Chapter – the sanctified weapons that are the most potent symbols of his office.

'I shall petition Marshal Brant to muster an army that we might avenge Brother Ansgar and our Chapter against the orks of the Blood Scar Tribe,' the Dreadnought said. 'And then we shall return to Armageddon.'

Brother Jarold surveyed the wreckage that was all that remained of the Speed Freeks expeditionary force. The kult's predilection for speed had proved their undoing. Stronger armour and better armament would have perhaps given them a better fighting chance against the inviolable armour of the Black Templars battleforce.

Sensors that saw in wavelengths ranging from infra-red to ultraviolet scanned the devastation searching for life-signs. If any greenskin had survived the Black Templars' rout they would not remain alive for long.

The once pristine white wilderness was now befouled with the gouged ruts of tyre tracks, blackened mounds of snow and ice thrown up by the artillery

shells of both sides, promethium spills and fossil-fuel slicks turning the ice desert black. Some puddles still burned, the oily smoke rising from them adding their own acrid pollution to the devastated wilderness. Impact craters pockmarked the glacier where some heavy shells had missed their targets; where others had hit, debris from large ork vehicles lay strewn across the snow.

The kult's battlewagon had met its end when the machine-spirit of Techmarine Isendur's personal Razorback transport targeted the battlewagon's primary weapon power cell. A single, directed pulse from the Razorback's twin-linked lascannon and the resulting detonation had not only taken out the gun-bristling battlewagon itself, but also a guntrukk, a warbuggy and three assorted warbikes.

This had also been the turning point in the battle, a devastating blow from which the orks never recovered. All that was left of them now were piles of burning debris, blackened craters in the ice and piles of crushed and eviscerated carcasses.

Brother Jarold stood at the centre of the devastation, amidst the splintered axle-shafts, buckled wheel-housings and twisted chassis of the orks' ramshackle vehicles.

Behind the imposing presence of the watchful Dreadnought massed the Black Templars of the Solemnus Crusade. That same crusade had set out twelve years before to avenge the atrocity perpetrated against the Templars' Chapter Keep on the world of Solemnus by the greenskins that fought under the banner of the Scarred Ork.

There were injuries among the crusaders, the most severe being the loss of a limb sustained by Brother Baldulf under the wheels of an ork warbike, although it wouldn't stop him from marching to battle alongside his brethren, his chainsword held high. But there were no brothers to mourn that day, to be marked on the roll of the fallen, maintained within the battle-chapel at the heart of the Solemnus fleet's flagship battle barge, the *Divine Fury*.

The Emperor was truly smiling upon their endeavours that day; for sixty-three verified enemy kills not one Black Templar had fallen to the Kult of Speed. It was all the proof Brother Jarold needed to feel vindicated that their search for their lost champion was the will of Him Enthroned on Holy Terra.

Brother Jarold gave thanks to the Emperor, the Primarch Dorn and Lord Sigismund, their Chapter-founder, that their sanctified boltguns had functioned fully during their battle with the greenskins and that not one of their war machines had been damaged beyond repair during the conflict.

The Black Templars land speeder squadron had decimated the ork bikes and trukks, the Rhinos and Razorbacks finishing off what Typhoon and Tornado had started, while the Space Marines bike squadron and two-manned attack bikes had harried those orks that attempted to flee the battlefield.

The bark of a storm bolter firing echoed across the ice field like the retort of a heavy artillery piece. It had a number of the Black Templars raking the mounds of debris and bodies with boltgun and flamer, seeking the source of the sound, ready to bring the fight to the enemy once again. Instead they found Brother Jarold, blue smoke coiling from the muzzles of his heavy storm bolter – a weapon so large it would not look out of place mounted on one of the fleet's precious Predators or Vindicators. The body of a greenskin Jarold had targeted spasmed as it was blown in two by the mass-reactive rounds.

Techmarine Isendur approached Jarold. The Dreadnought dwarfed even the crimson-armoured Techmarine, whose twitching servo-arm – which seemed to move with a life all of its own – made him appear even taller than the average superhuman Space Marine. Behind him, Isendur's servitor team were making repairs to superficial damage sustained by the Razorback in the battle, or keeping an unstinting watch over those working on the machine, depending on their designation and degree of sentient programming.

Sensing the Techmarine's presence before he had a chance to speak Jarold asked, 'Are our brothers ready to move on the objective again?'

'Affirmative, brother,' the other replied in that familiar emotionless way of his, that was so out of character when compared with the passion and zeal exhibited by the rest of the crusade's fanatical warriors. 'At your command.'

'How far do you judge us to be from our target?

'Twelve point zero-seven-six kilometres,' the Techmarine intoned. It had been remarked upon on more than one occasion that Isendur was more akin to the machines to which he ministered than his brother Space Marines.

‘And the nature of the signal,’ Jarold said. ‘Is it still as it appeared from orbit?’

‘More so,’ Isendur said. ‘As hypothesised, the anomalous readings detected from orbit are indicative of some form of primitive teleportation technology.’

Grim satisfaction warred with Jarold’s overriding sense of guilt and barely-supressed rage. The memory of the moment Jarold witnessed the mech-enhanced greenskin warboss teleport out of the devastated mekboy’s lab blazed within his mind as hot and red as the moment when he had been cut down by a rusting cybernetic claw, that had earned him the privilege of being encased within the Dreadnought shell that had formerly been the living tomb of Ancient Brother Dedric.

The moment Emperor’s Champion Ansgar had been taken from right in front of him replayed itself through his mind for what seemed like the thousandth time…

He saw himself closing on the alien tyrant again, a sphere of crackling emerald light surrounding the ork and his unconscious prisoner. He watched again as the green glare of the crackling shield intensified.

And then, just as his crashing steps brought him within reach of the xenos brute, with a sub-sonic boom the sphere of light imploded, plunging the ruins of the laboratory into sudden darkness. Only a retina-searing after-image remained, trapped within the sensor-linked optic nerves of Jarold’s physical body, but of Emperor’s Champion Ansgar and the alien warboss Morkrull Grimskar there was no sign…

‘Then the command is given,’ Jarold said simply.

Wherever the orks were using their wildly unpredictable teleportation technology, there was the possibility that the reconstructed Grimskar, nemesis of the Solemnus Crusade, would be there too. And if the greenskin warboss *was* there, there was also the possibility that they would find Ansgar too.

Isendur made an adjustment to the signum he held out before him in one crimson gauntlet. Servo-motors whined as the Dreadnought turned to observe the Techmarine with its faceless sarcophagus front. ‘Brother Isendur? Is there something else?’

‘I am picking up another signal,’ the Techmarine said.

‘Another teleport signal?’ Jarold asked.

‘No. It is weak, like a resting pulse.’

‘What is its source?’

‘Bearing zero six-seven point three.’

‘And what would you hazard is the nature of this signal?’

‘There is a fifty-two per cent probability that it is electromagnetic interference caused by isotopes buried in the bedrock beneath the glacier,’ the Techmarine explained. ‘But there is also a twenty-three per cent probability that it is interference caused by the disruption of the planet’s magnetic field by the teleportation matrix. One way or the other, probability tells us that it probably is not worth pursuing.’

‘But what of the other twenty-five per cent?’ Jarold enquired.

‘There is a possibility that it is a signal from a dormant power source. But it is unlikely.’

‘What sort of power source?’ Jarold pressed.

‘Like that of a dying power cell.’

‘As might be found inside a Deathwind automated weapons system. Or a Dreadnought.’

‘It is increasingly unlikely but still a slim possibility,’ Isendur persisted, not prepared to have his logic refuted. ‘If our mission is to find the source of the teleport signal I would recommend that we move on that target forthwith and ignore this weaker signum reading.’

The knowledge that there was a possibility – no matter how slim – that the signal was the last sign of a lost brother Dreadnought, whether Templar or otherwise, played on Jarold’s mind. Dreadnoughts were potent weapons of the Astartes Chapters and revered relics. An entire battleforce would willingly fight to reclaim a fallen Dreadnought brother. Only in the direst circumstances would a Space Marine commander abandon such a sacred relic to the field of battle.

To recover such a potent treasure, whatever Chapter it might belong to, would be of incalculable value to the war effort. Just one Dreadnought could help bolster the Astartes forces on one of Armageddon’s numerous war-fronts, and who knew what impact that could have in the long term on the struggle for the contested planet.

‘I respect your opinion, Brother-Techmarine, you know that. You and your brethren of the Forge have tended to me on numerous occasions, but you see only the logic of variables and algorithms. I have the benefit of

experience and the wisdom of years and I disagree. We shall investigate the source of this other signal and then, when we have resolved what it is, we will press on towards our primary objective.'

'Very well, brother,' Isendur conceded. 'As you wish.'

The Dreadnought turned to survey the re-ordered ranks of the Black Templars' strike force.

'Brothers,' he declaimed, his voice booming over the burning battlefield, flurries of snow hissing as they melted in the licking flames of the promethium fires. 'The word is given. In the name of the Emperor, Primarch Dorn and Lord Sigismund, move out.'

'Is this the place?' Jarold asked, scanning the blizzard-scoured ice valley. The ice sheet rose up before them to meet the frozen slopes of a ridge of razor-edged peaks beyond which curious green corposant flickered and danced across the sky.

'Affirmative,' Techmarine Isendur replied, consulting the signum in his hand once more.

The hulking black Dreadnought and the crimson-armoured Techmarine stood before a wall of blue ice as solid and as impenetrable as rockcrete.

'So where, precisely, is the source of the signal?'

'Six point eight-nine metres downwards. If we are to discover the source of the signal we are going to have to dig.'

'Then we dig,' Jarold stated bluntly.

'Leave it to me, brother,' Isendur said. The Techmarine signalled the waiting column. 'Brothers Larce and Nyle,' he said, summoning those two crusaders. Jarold understood what it was he had in mind.

Larce, flamer in hand, and Nyle, bearing his thrice-blessed meltagun, joined them before the wall of blue ice.

'Brothers,' Jarold said, 'let the Emperor's holy fire cleanse these xenos-blighted lands.'

Techmarine Isendur directing their fire, Larce and Nyle hit the glacier with everything their weapons could muster.

Initiate Tobrecan brought his bike up to join them and directed a series of searing blasts from the plasma gun mounted on the front of his machine at the glacier. When the steam and mist cleared, Brothers Larce and Nyle stepped up again, while Initiate Isen drove his attack bike forwards, Gunner

Leax turning his multi-melta on the metres thick ice.

The Space Marines' flamers and plasma weapons swiftly melted a shaft through the ice to the source of the signal Isendur had located via his signum. Steaming geysers of cloud rose from the hole in the glacier as the boiling water bubbling at the bottom of the pit re-condensed as it came into contact with the cold air.

'Now then, Brother-Techmarine,' Jarold said, standing at the edge of the cone-shaped shaft, 'let us see what lies buried here.'

Using his servo-arm to assist him in his descent, Techmarine Isendur clambered into the steaming shadows of the ice pit. The rest of the strike force waited in tense anticipation to see which would be proved right; the Techmarine or the Dreadnought.

Bracing himself within the shaft Isendur looked down at the shadow still locked beneath one last remaining layer of ice.

'You were right,' his voice rose from the bottom of the pit. There was no hint of annoyance or praise in its tone.

'I was right,' the Dreadnought rumbled with righteous satisfaction.

'Do we wake him?' the Techmarine asked, something like awe tingeing his words, as he stared down at the statuesque creation of frost-rimed adamantium beneath him. A faint red glow pulsed weakly behind the ice, and yet as regular as a heartbeat.

'He is a brother Space Marine.'

'He is a Crimson Fist,' the Techmarine testified.

'But our brother nonetheless. So we wake him.'

He remembered…

Thunder rumbled over the ice fields and frozen, broken peaks of the Dead Lands. It was the crack and boom of heavy artillery fire. The iron-hard ground shook with the force of an earthquake, more so than it did at his own wrathful steps.

He remembered…

Rank upon rank of Space Marines, squad after squad of his fellow battle-brothers, marching against the enemy, their Chapter banners flying proudly above them. Magnificent in their regal blue power armour, their left hands blood-red – recalling the ceremony conducted at the initiation of new Chapter Masters in the former Imperial Fists Legion – their battle-

consecrated boltguns cinched tight to their chest plates ready to deliver the Emperor's ultimate justice to the enemy.

And he remembered…

The war machine. A stompa, the rank and file troops of the Armageddon PDF had called it. A mobile war-altar dedicated to the hated greenskins' brutal heathen gods. An icon to thoughtless bloodshed and mindless destruction.

He remembered…

Marching to war across the bitter wastes, shoulder to shoulder with his battle-brothers, the ork host charging to meet them, the glacier's surface fracturing beneath the greenskins' advance, the freezing wind as sharp and as cold as a blade of ice slicing the air between them.

He remembered…

Faced with insurmountable odds, a new strategy had to be formed, shaped within the heat of battle.

He remembered volunteering, proud that he should be the one to bring an end to this conflict. He remembered sound and heat and light. He remembered dying a second time.

And then, amidst the clamour of battle and the cataclysmic roar of destruction, he heard a voice.

'Brother,' it said. 'Awake.'

The dull red glow behind the visor of the Dreadnought's sarcophagus helm pulsed more brightly with every word the Dreadnought spoke. Its voice was phlegmy and cracked from age and lack of use.

'I am sorry, brother, but what did you say?'

A sound like vox-distorted coughing crackled from the ancient. Then the Dreadnought tried again.

'You are on Armageddon, brother,' Jarold replied. 'You are here, within the Dead Lands.'

The coughing resumed, rose to a crescendo and then subsided at last.

'No. When is it?' the venerable asked. 'My internal chronograph appears to be malfunctioning.'

Techmarine Isendur answered in terms precise to three decimal places.

The Crimson Fist was silent for several long moments.

'How long have you been here, brother?' Jarold dared to ask at last. 'Since

the conflict began?’

‘You mean to tell me that Armageddon has been a contested world all this time?’ the venerable said with something like disbelieving incomprehension.

‘Yes, since the abomination Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka fell upon this world for a second time.’

‘A second time?’

Jarold regarded the ancient suspiciously.

‘Tell me, brother, how long have you been trapped here, entombed within the ice?’

Several moments more passed before the venerable was able to speak again. ‘Fifty years, brother Templar. I have been trapped here, lost, for fifty years.’

The vehicles had been parked up and the massed force of Brother Jarold’s avenging angels had formed a circle of unbreakable armour. All were included, from the newest neophyte to the oldest initiate. The formation of the praying Space Marines served as a barricade against the biting winds that swept across the Dead Lands, stabbing at any exposed flesh with knives of ice. It affected the neophytes – Gervais, Feran, Eadig and Galan – worst, for they were yet to earn the right to wear the full power armour as worn by their brethren and their heads were exposed. But if the freezing wind caused them any discomfort they didn’t show it. Weakness of the flesh was not permitted of a Space Marine.

Brother Jarold stood on one side of the circle and opposite him loomed the Venerable Rhodomanus of the Crimson Fists.

The latter’s crimson and regal blue paintwork was in stark contrast to the predominantly black and white power armour of the Templars – although some of the older, more ornamented suits worn by those veterans among the battleforce were traced with gold and red as well.

The moaning wind whirled flurries of snow around them but over the voice of the blizzard, Brother Jarold’s booming prayers could be heard quite plainly.

‘We shall bring down His almighty wrath and fury upon the xenos and drive the greenskin from the face of this planet!’ Jarold bellowed. ‘For the Emperor and the primarch!’

‘For the Emperor and the primarch!’ his battle-brothers responded with fervent zeal.

‘For the Emperor and the primarch,’ Venerable Rhodomanus echoed.

Brother Jarold had not needed to ask the ancient whether he would deign to join the Templars on the continuation of their mission. To awaken to a world fifty years into his future and so unchanged despite the passage of time, and yet finding his brother Crimson Fists with whom he had fought shoulder to shoulder against the greenskins gone, the prospect of fighting alongside the Templars had given him a noble purpose. Here was a chance to finish what he and his brothers had started.

For what purpose could there be for a Space Marine, other than eternal service? If he were denied the right to serve Him Enthroned on Holy Terra, a Space Marine’s long life, and all the battles he had fought, everything he had achieved in His holy name would count as naught.

The Black Templars and Crimson Fists – two Chapters formed in the aftermath of the Heresy ten thousand years before – were both successor Chapters of the original Imperial Fists Legion, created from the very genetic material of the Primarch Rogal Dorn. Templar and Fist owed their very existence to the lauded Rogal Dorn, so there had never been any question as to whether Rhodomanus would join the Black Templars of the Solemnus Crusade. They were brothers-in-arms; that was all that mattered.

Brother Jarold surveyed the assembled Templars, the ancient Fist and the ice-clad vista beyond.

‘It is time,’ he said, scanning the ridge of sickle-shaped peaks on the horizon. ‘Whatever the source of the anomalous signals detected by the fleet, it lies beyond that ridge.

‘Today we show the greenskins why they should fear us. We let them see why we are fear incarnate. Today we take the fight to the enemy. Today we purge the Dead Lands of the xenos plague that blights this world.

‘Move out!’

Their act of worship concluded, with renewed steel in their hearts, shielded by the armour of their faith as much as by the ceramite of their power armour, the circle broke up as the Space Marines returned to their vehicles. With a roar of mighty engines, like the wrathful prayers of Brother Jarold himself, Ansgar’s Avengers moved out.

The force progressed slowly, so as to never leave the Dreadnoughts far behind. Brother Jarold had deployed into the heart of the Dead Lands by drop pod and the Templars had not anticipated having another ancient join them in their quest to find the source of the anomalous readings. There was no means of transporting them, other than for them to continue under their own propulsion.

But it still did not take them long to climb the icy slopes of a pass between the jagged obsidian-black peaks. Initiate-pilot Egeslic took his land speeder on ahead, to scout out what lay in wait for them on the other side of the ridge. He returned presently, guiding his speeder deftly over the ice, compensating for wind shear as he descended from the crest of the pass, and brought the vehicle to a hovering halt beside the clumping Dreadnought.

'Brother Jarold,' Egeslic said, 'you should see this for yourself.'

'That,' said Techmarine Isendur, pointing into the heart of the crater that had been dug into the ice, 'is the source of the anomalous readings.'

From the Space Marines' position at the mouth of the pass, sheltered by the shadows of the looming wind-scoured ice sculptures that surmounted the ridge in impossible overhangs, Brother Jarold surveyed the rift in the ice below them.

The ork-dug crevasse was a hive of seemingly disorganised industry. Everywhere he looked he saw orks. The foul xenos covered the glacier in a thick, dense green carpet as they swarmed over the dig site, the clamour of their mining machines ringing from the ice walls around them. There were customised digging machines, and other ork vehicles had been pressed into strange service here too. Some of these machines bore banner poles, bearing the iconography that demonstrated the ork tribe's loyalty. The sight of the Scarred Ork again – the ugly steel-cut tribal glyph bearing a rust red lightning bolt scar that bisected its crude simulacra features – filled Brother Jarold with both righteous satisfaction and indignation in equal measure.

They had found the one tribe that Jarold had hoped they would. The orks labouring within the ice pit were of the Blood Scar tribe. Truly the Emperor was smiling upon their endeavours that day.

But focusing again upon the coarse alien totem Jarold felt rage burn within him like he had not known since the moment the reconstructed warboss

Morkrull Grimskar had made his cowardly escape, taking the body of the Emperor's Champion Ansgar with him as he teleported out of the mekboy's crumbling lab smothered within the foetid green depths of the equatorial jungle.

'Is there a teleportation device somewhere here?' Jarold demanded of the Techmarine, watching the waves of green corposant rolling across the underside of the thick clouds that covered the arctic valley. He had to be certain.

'I have recalibrated the signum and fine-tuned the signal, brother,' the Techmarine said. 'And there is.'

Excitement pulsed through the husk of Jarold's mortal remains locked within the life-preserving amniotic tank of the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

Had they really tracked down their long-sought-for quarry at last? Was the warboss here? And if he was, was Brother Ansgar with him?

Jarold gazed down into the crater again and treacherous doubt began to creep between his thoughts of righteousness revenge. But it was not the size of the ork horde that filled Brother Jarold's mind with appalled awe and wonder but the effigy that they had virtually finished digging out of the solid ice of the glacier that had spilled between the frost-chiselled peaks into this valley like some great frozen and fractured river.

Venerable Rhodomanus saw it too. And remembered.

The war machine. An appalling amalgamation of scavenged weapons and armour, the product of unholy alien engineering and genetically pre-programmed habit, the living embodiment of ork savagery and the relentless desire for war.

The monster – for it was a monster – crashed across the glacier, decimating the Crimson Fists' frontline. The Space Marines brought their armour and heavy weapons to bear but it was too little compared to the might of the monstrous god-machine that now marched to war before them.

Desperate times called for desperate measures and Rhodomanus had never known them more desperate. Something had to be done to bring about the destruction of this angry god.

And so, supported by his noble brethren Fists, he had strode forth to conquer the beast in one final act of self-sacrifice. His battle-brothers falling one by one at his side, giving their lives – all of them – that he might

complete his final mission, weathering shoota, kannon, gatler and a storm of rokkits, the ancient was able to breach the stompa's shields and place the thermal charges at its very feet.

'The Emperor protects,' he intoned, quietly resigned to his fate.

Then all was white noise, heat and light.

For one brief moment the ice of millennia became a torrent of liquid water again and the blazing stompa sank beneath the sudden waves. The force of the blast hurled Rhodomanus across the sky like a blazing comet and he thought he heard the Emperor calling him to serve at his side in the next world…

'The idol lives,' Rhodomanus breathed.

It was clear to all – and not just Techmarine Isendur's practised eye – that the orks had finished carving the remains of the war machine from the body of the glacier and were now busy attempting to reactivate it; re-fuelling it, testing its growling motive systems and firing off bursts of random weapons-fire from its many and varied weapon emplacements.

There was a hungry roar of pistons firing and thick billows of greasy black smoke gouted from the proliferation of smoke-stacks and exhaust flues that rose from the back of the alien war idol.

'That, I take it, is not the source of the signal we have been tracking, is it?' Jarold quizzed the Techmarine standing beside him.

'No, brother. That is.' Isendur pointed with his power axe.

'I see it,' Rhodomanus said.

Jarold looked again, refocusing his optical sensors, and then he saw it too.

It was a vast assemblage of iron beams and girders, crackling brass orbs and endless spools of cabling. It was supported by an immense scaffold and yet the whole massive structure had been hidden by the blizzard and the bulk of the ork effigy standing before it.

The device culminated in a huge gun-barrelled probe that Jarold imagined to be a beam transmitter, supported on strong gantry arms.

'By Sigismund's sword!' Jarold gasped.

'Its designation in this warzone is an ork teleporter, I believe,' Isendur said.

'We should warn the fleet,' Jarold said. 'We cannot allow the xenos filth continued access to such weaponry or technology,' he added as he pondered

the matter in hand. It was clear to Jarold now that the orks intended to teleport their scavenged stompa out of the ice-locked Dead Lands to be used on another war front and bolster their forces there. Such a reinforcement could turn the tide of battle in the orks' favour. Such a thing could not be allowed to happen.

'Yes, brother,' Isendur replied.

Tense moments later, with Jarold watching the heavens as if he expected the *Divine Fury* to deliver a thunderbolt directly from heaven against the stompa, the Techmarine made his report. 'The interference being generated by the teleporter that we detected from orbit is now preventing my signal from getting through to the crusade fleet,' he said, delivering his bad tidings without any obvious emotion.

They were alone down there.

'We are going to have to deal with the stompa and the teleporter ourselves,' Rhodomanus declared. 'We cannot allow the greenskins to make it away from here with their idol intact. It is against the will of the Emperor.'

'Then we shall face the enemy in battle once again; fight them hand to hand if that is what it takes,' Jarold said, his assault cannon whining as it began to run up to speed. 'Just the way we like it.'

With the roar of bike engines and heavy armour running at maximum speed, the Black Templars poured through the ridge pass and into the carved crevasse in the ice before the orks had any warning as to what was happening.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' Brother Jarold boomed as he tramped down the glacial slopes towards the great ork-gouged hole, the toe-hooks of his Dreadnought feet locking him securely in place on the treacherous ice.

'There is only the Emperor!' Rhodomanus joined, urging the crusading Space Marines on. 'He is our shield and our protector!'

First came the bikes and attack bikes, pouring over the lip of the ridge, past the clumping Dreadnought. Then came the Razorbacks and the Rhinos, the heavy armour grinding over the ice of the glacier, pounding it to shards beneath their tracks, heavy bolter fire riddling both the ice sheet and those orks that had mustered enough awareness to try to do something about the approaching Space Marines.

The Land speeder squadron hurtled over the ridge after the rest of the Templar armour past the advancing battleforce, the *whub-whub-whub* of their engines thrumming through the ice, the Tornado's assault cannon rattling off hard rounds into the milling orks as they hurried to respond to this new threat.

With a whooshing roar, the Typhoon fired off a barrage of missiles. The rockets corkscrewed through the air and impacted in a series of scathing detonations amidst the moving ork armour. Bodies, armour plating and wheels were thrown into the air to land in broken burning piles.

With a searing scream, the lascannon mounted on Techmarine Isendur's Razorback fired, a blinding spear of light burning through the constant snow flurries and illuminating the crevasse like an incendiary shell-burst. A moment later the crater was illuminated again as an ork halftrakk exploded in a sheet of flame, the las-blast having hit both its fuel tank and the rokkits loaded into the back of it.

There was the *crack* and *crump* of frag grenades detonating amidst the greenskin horde, and orks fell in their dozens.

Some of the orks had climbed aboard their trukks and bikes again. They revved their engines as they turned their vehicles to face the oncoming Black Templars armour.

The orks were rallying. Jarold's crusaders had made the most of the advantage that stealth and the blessings of the Emperor had brought them but now the enemy were starting to organise a cohesive defence.

As war trukks and heavy orkish bikes began to converge on the advancing Templar armour, those battle-brothers piloting the fleet's venerated vehicles urged them forwards, Techmarine Isendur making supplication to the Omnissiah in the same unmodulated tone, over and over.

At the bottom of the crater, in the shadow of the dug-out idol, the two sides met with a roar of over-revving engines and the scream of shearing metal. Sparks flew, armour plating buckled, axles sheared and fuel tanks ruptured. Orks were thrown over the hulls of Rhinos and land speeders. Milling grots were crushed under the tracks of Rhinos and ork bikes alike. Others among the horde were gunned down by the blazing, blessed bolters of the Templars, the ork guns unable to match the reliability or accuracy of the Space Marines' arsenal.

But despite their primitive design there was one thing that the ork guns had

over the Templars' weapons; there were more of them. Far more. It was becoming painfully apparent that the Templars were drastically outnumbered, at least twenty to one. Although the Emperor's chosen were renowned for their fighting prowess, those were odds that tested even a Space Marine. There was a very real danger that sheer weight of numbers would see them overwhelmed, if the orks were able to unify their attack.

But Brother Jarold – now part of the rearguard, finishing off those greenskins that had evaded the Templars' guns – had realised this would be the case before he had committed his fighting force to this action.

It was clear that the Blood Scar orks were planning on teleporting the stompa from this location, to deploy elsewhere on Armageddon. Jarold's plan had always been to infiltrate the dig site and bring down the war-effigy or, failing that, seize and hold the colossal ork teleporter until Isendur found a way to destroy it.

With a scream of failing engines, Initiate-Pilot Egeslic's land speeder ploughed into the surface of the glacier: an ork shokk attack gun had made a lucky hit. A gaggle of snarling boyz piled onto the downed speeder, burying Egeslic and Initiate-gunner Fraomar beneath a flurry of thumping axes and stabbing serrated knives.

The two Rhinos slewed to a halt in the middle of the crater, dropped their hatches and the troops they were carrying poured out in a tide of funereal black and gleaming white. Boltguns barking and chainswords screaming, they met the milling rabble head on. They might be outnumbered, but they were in the thick of battle, which was the only place where a Templar might hope to win his honour-badges.

Venerable Rhodomanus's multi-melta pulsed, and a swarm of orks died as their blood boiled and their own bodily fluids broiled their internal organs.

The ice field was lit up again, this time as a sphere of actinic light exploded into life like a miniature sun at the periphery of the Templar lines. The explosion pushed a great wave of concussive force before it as the land speeder Typhoon and its remaining payload of missiles were obliterated by a direct hit from the stompa's now active deth kannon.

Brother Jarold stood firm, as ork bikes tumbled end over end past him, carried before the bow-wave of explosive force. He then turned his assault cannon on the surviving greenskins now running from the epicentre of destruction, holy wrath pounding through what little remained of him that

was still flesh and blood.

‘Brother Jarold,’ Techmarine Isendur’s voice crackled over the comm-net, the interference caused by the orks’ unstable teleporter technology affecting even close range communications.

‘What is it, brother? Report.’

‘We have our objective.’ Isendur declared with something dangerously like emotion tingeing his words. ‘The teleporter is ours.’

‘Your objective is the teleporter; reconvene there,’ Jarold commanded, his battle-brothers hearing him through the comm in their helmets, his words also carrying to them over the bestial roars and bolter fire of the battlefield. ‘Repeat, rally at the teleporter.’

The device was huge, on a monumental scale that even an ancient such as Venerable Rhodomanus had never witnessed before. It was too big a target to miss. The Templars had teleport technology themselves, of course, hidden within the bowels of the Forgeship *Goliath* where it was carefully tended and operated by the Techmarine Masters of the Forge and their servitors, but they had nothing approaching the size of this brutal piece of esoteric machinery.

Techmarine Isendur felt something approaching heretical awe on seeing the monstrous device arrayed before him in all its terrible, alien glory.

The Templars were brutally outnumbered by the thuggish orks, but by launching a surprise attack, the vengeful Space Marines had been able to penetrate far into the dig site; the either arrogant or idiotic orks having failed to post anything like enough sentries to create an effective defensive perimeter. They had probably not thought to be interrupted out here in the trackless frozen wastes of the Dead Lands for little could survive in these bitter wastes other than the alien orks. But then, from what Jarold had witnessed first-hand, it seemed that orks could survive pretty much anywhere.

The Templars’ fast-moving, heavy armour had been able to penetrate the ork crater that held the ice-locked stompa with ease, the Razorbacks and Rhinos ploughing into the aliens and their scratch-built vehicles as if sainted Sigismund himself were smiting the foul xenos from beyond the stars, where he now stood at Primarch Dorn’s right hand.

But now the initially bewildered orks had rallied and were mounting an effective counter-attack against the Black Templars' lightning assault.

Despite the crusading Chapter's prowess in hand-to-hand combat, even hardened fighters such as Brother Jarold's avenging warriors would be hard-pressed to overcome when facing such impossibly overwhelming odds.

The best they could hope for was to sell themselves dear. They might not have found their lost Brother Ansgar or their nemesis the warlord Morkrull Grimskar, but they could end their crusade here, denying the ork host the war machine that the greenskins had fought so hard to win again.

Bikes – in both the black and white livery of the Templars and the scruffy red kustom paint jobs of the orks – roared past Brother Jarold as he stomped across the battlefield. He took aim and fired. The front wheel of a warbike that was pursuing a Space Marine attack bike – its gunner whooping wildly as it took pot-shots at the noble Templars – disintegrated in a hail of cannon fire. The wheel struts dug into the ice, halting the bike's forward motion. The vehicle flipped over, hurling the ork gunner into the path of a hurtling land speeder – the surprised-looking greenskin bouncing off the hull with the unmistakable sound of breaking bone – while the bike's driver was crushed beneath the great weight of the bike landing on top of it and crushing its spine.

Jarold turned his bolter on a gaggle of greenskins that charged him, large-calibre shootas and clumsy chain-bladed weapons in their meaty paws. A burst of flesh-shredding gunfire and then he was through. Nothing now stood between him and the ork teleporter.

And he wasn't the only one to have made it to the objective. Sergeant Bellangere had led the men under his command by example – bolt pistol in one hand, chainsword in the other dripping with alien gore – and hadn't lost a single member of his squad in the process. He and his troops were even now finishing off the last of the resistance being put up by the orks that crawled all over the vast gantries of the teleporter, an augmented mekboy falling to Bellangere's gutting chainblade.

Jarold turned to survey the smoking craters and tight knots of fighting that characterised the battlefield dig-site. The crumpled wreckage of a devastated Rhino lay nearby, as did the smouldering remains of a bike. Most of the Templar armour had made it through to the objective, but not

all. Jarold caught glimpses of scratched black and blistered white amidst the bodies of the slain between billows of smoke from burning wrecks strewn across the combat zone.

On seeing his fallen battle-brothers Jarold felt his blood boil. The machine-spirit that resided with him inside his Dreadnought body informed him of the names of each and every one of the fallen – Initiate Garr and Gunner Heolstor, Brother Derian, Brother Eghan and Brother Clust of Squad Garrond, Clust's heavy bolter lying useless on the ice under his eviscerated body.

Brother Jarold was shaken from his enraged reverie by what felt like an earthquake.

The ground shook, splinters of ice twenty metres tall breaking free of the glacier as the stompa began to move. The orks had finally coaxed their idol into unnatural life once more.

Like Brother Rhodomanus it had lain locked in the ice for the last fifty years. Like Brother Rhodomanus it now had a second chance to finish what Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka's hordes had started half a century ago.

At the growl of the effigy's engines, filthy smoke poured from its chimney-exhausts, filling the cerulean blue sky with stinking black clouds.

The stompa's wrecking ball attachment – the krusher itself looking like a huge rusted boulder – came whirling around over the top of its pintle arm mount, crashing down on top of a Rhino with all the force of a meteorite impact. The tank's adamantium plates buckled under the force of the wrecking ball blow, sending the troop transport bouncing off the uneven ice-gouged bedrock that had lain buried beneath the glacier until the orks had dug it up.

As Jarold watched, what was left of Neophyte Feran rocketed skyward as an ork skorcha engulfed his body in flame, detonating the krak grenades he carried at his waist.

Raging to the heavens at the death of another battle-brother, and one who had not yet had the chance to prove himself in glorious battle to his brethren's satisfaction, the Dreadnought turned his blazing weapons on the ork responsible.

The barrels of his assault cannon glowing red hot, his mind-linked machine-spirit informed him that his auto-loaders would soon be out of ammunition. But if today was his day to die a second death then he would

make it his vow to take as many of the Blood Scar orks with him as possible.

Jarold surveyed the scorched glacier around him. The remaining Black Templar armour had formed a cordon around the teleporter, every vehicle's guns pointing outwards towards the enemy now pouring over the ground towards their position. The aliens' fury at the audacity of the Templars in taking the teleporter spurred them on, the savage brutes giving voice to harsh barks and hoots of wild abandon.

'Brothers!' Jarold declared, his voice echoing strangely from the derricks and hoists of the corposant-sheathed structure. 'This day we show the xenos filth that Armageddon is not theirs for the taking. This day we show the orks that we will leave no wrong unavenged, no slight unchallenged. This day we will deliver the Emperor's divine retribution upon the heads of the greenskin defilers of this world in the name of Primarch Dorn and his servant Lord Sigismund.'

Jarold turned his storm bolter on another charging ork and took its head off with one mass-reactive round.

'Brothers! Today we sell ourselves dear in the name of the Emperor that we might deny the orks another victory upon the shores of Armageddon. We have a new mission. We will not depart this world until we have ensured that they may never make use of their teleporter or their war-idol again. Today is a good day to die!'

With a scream of rending metal, lightning-drenched claws tore through the chugging engine of an ork wartrakk as its armour plating melted under the intense heat-blast of a multi-melta.

As the smoke and flames died back again, the Black Templar Dreadnought watched with grim satisfaction as the still more imposing and ornamented form of Venerable Rhodomanus strode through the devastation to reach the protection of the cordon of crusader armour, crushing a flailing ork beneath one colossal foot whilst snatching the mangled body of another from the wrecked wartrakk and quartering its head between the crimson talons of his colossal power fist.

'No, brother,' the ancient boomed. 'I am sorry to contradict you, but today is not your day to die.'

As he reached the Templar line, Rhodomanus turned his multi-melta on an ork bike, igniting its fuel tank; the vehicle and its rider disappeared in a

sheet of incandescent flame.

‘It is not your destiny that you give your lives in sacrifice to stop this blasphemy,’ the venerable went on, as if making his decree. ‘Your mission is not yet done. You must live to fight another day.’

Jarold did not interrupt, but listened, considering Rhodomanus’s words as he targeted the ork manning the flamethrower mounted on the back of a rumbling halftrakk.

‘This is my battle, brother,’ Rhodomanus continued. ‘It is up to me to accomplish what I and my brother Fists tried to fifty years ago.’

The ancient was right. This was not the Templars’ battle. The destruction of the ork war machine had never been their objective. Brother Ansgar still awaited them, somewhere. And it was up to Jarold and the others to find him. It was as they had sworn it.

But none of that changed the fact that they were severely outnumbered and completely surrounded, with little hope of being able to turn the tide of battle in their favour now, unable to even call for extraction by the fleet.

The superstructure of the incomparable ork device in whose shadow they now sheltered hummed and twanged as orkish hard rounds and crackling energy beams spanged off its pylons and girders.

‘Do you think you can fathom the workings of this teleporter?’ Jarold asked his Techmarine.

‘All ork machines are primitive and alien,’ Isendur replied, ‘but I would predict a seventy per cent chance of success.’

‘Then set to work,’ Jarold instructed. ‘By the Emperor, I want this thing operational and locked onto the fleet in orbit as soon as is humanly possible.’

With a dull crump the speeding guntrukk exploded, obliterated by the massed barrage of heavy weapons that pounded it.

Standing side by side against the horde, the Dreadnoughts Jarold and Rhodomanus locked onto a new target and a warbike disintegrated into shrapnel.

Only a matter of metres away, Brother Huarwar died as he was decapitated at close quarters by a heavily mekanised ork. Roaring in grief-stricken pain, Jarold broke from the circle, advancing on the creature responsible, litanies of hate spouting from his vox-casters like bile as he shredded the alien’s

augmented body with raking bolter and cannon fire.

‘Brother Isendur!’ he bellowed over the howls of the orks and the savage chatter of their guns, ignoring the succession of hard rounds that rattled off his own adamantium body-shell as if they were no more than the stings of rad-midges. ‘Give me some good news!’

‘I have subjugated what passes for the device’s machine-spirit, patching a link via one of my servitors and dominating it with a liturgical sub-routine, and, through its transmitter array, have located the fleet in orbit and Forgeship *Goliath*–’

‘Brother!’ Jarold boomed, bisecting an ork from midriff to neck with a barrage of bolter fire. ‘Is it ready?’

‘Aye, brother,’ Isendur replied. ‘It is ready.’

‘Then begin the evacuation.’

As the two Dreadnoughts held back the press of the ork horde with bolter and fist, cannon and melta, at Jarold’s command the strike force moved back beneath the beam emitter of the huge gantry, never once turning their backs on the enemy, claiming a dozen ork lives for every step they took in retreat.

It was not the Templars’ way to retreat in the face of greater numbers of the enemy. But for the brethren of the Solemnus Crusade, this was their last action. They could not afford to sacrifice their lives so freely, not when their holy work remained undone. They were yet to recover Brother Ansgar’s body and repay the warboss Morkrull Grimskar for all the monster had taken from them when the orks of the Blood Scar tribe razed the Chapter Keep on Solemnus.

They had all sworn it – every crusading battle-brother, from neophyte to initiate, Techmarine to Apothecary, Dreadnought to Marshal, Chaplain to Champion – and they could not relinquish the fight until their vow had been fulfilled, not when a way out of this impossible situation had presented itself.

So large was the ork teleporter – it having been intended to beam something as gargantuan as the stompa to another arena of battle – that the entirety of the survivors of Jarold’s battleforce could fit within the circumference of the projection plate beneath the enormous beam emitter.

They would go together. That was how Brother Jarold wanted it. Whether their plan worked, and the teleporter returned them to the Forgeship

Goliath, or scattered their component atoms to the stars, they would go together. The only ones they would leave behind were one tech-servitor to initiate the firing sequence of the teleporter's beam-gun, and Venerable Brother Rhodomanus of the Crimson Fists.

'Brother Jarold,' came Techmarine Isendur's voice with something almost like urgency in his usually unexcitable tone. 'Our departure now waits only on your presence upon the plate.'

Jarold turned to Rhodomanus, swivelling about the pivot of his waist bearing, as if he were about to address the venerable, blasting a leaping axe-wielding ork out of the air with a single, well-placed shot.

'Go, brother,' Rhodomanus said, before the other could speak. 'Go to meet your destiny and leave me to face mine.'

'It has been an honour,' Jarold stated stoically.

'Aye, it has been that,' the ancient agreed.

'Die well, brother. For the primarch.'

'For Dorn. Now go.'

Rhodomanus directed another blast from his multi-melta into the press of the ork pack, the heat blast clearing ten metres around him in every direction.

Taking his leave, Brother Jarold defiantly turned his back on the orks and marched to join his battle-brothers at the heart of the humming teleporter, the venerable laying down covering fire behind him, like some colossal avatar of the Emperor's retribution.

And as he did so, he began to intone Dorn's litany of service.

'What is your life?' he began. 'My honour is my life.'

An ork fell to scything fire from his storm bolter.

'What is your fate? My duty is my fate.'

Another was impaled on the crackling blades of his power fist.

'What is your fear? My fear is to fail.'

As he retreated behind Rhodomanus, Brother Jarold gave voice to the defiant battle cry in one last act of defiance directed at the alien orks.

'No pity!' Brother Jarold boomed.

'No remorse!' his battle-brothers responded, taking up his battle cry.

'No fear!' they bellowed in unison, clashing their weapons against their holy armour in a clattering cacophony of defiance.

Corposant crawled over and around the superstructure of the ork teleporter

in writhing serpents of sick green light. With an apocalyptic scream like the sundering of the heavens, the beam-emitter fired.

Rhodomanus did not look back. He knew the Templars were gone.

‘And what is your reward?’ he asked, his voice rising like a challenge against the ravening greenskins. ‘My salvation is my reward!’

Three orks fell to a withering hail of bolter fire.

‘What is your craft? My craft is death!’

The multi-melta put an end to another ork bike.

‘What is your pledge?’

The venerable hesitated. He could see the stompa advancing on him now, and him alone, belching smoke into the air from its exhaust-stacks, its colossal mass shaking the ground with its every step.

‘My pledge is eternal service!’

As the stompa closed on the teleporter at last, with heavy, purposeful steps that sent tremors skittering through the bedrock that lay beneath the glacier, an inescapable fact wormed its way into the spirit-linked mind of the ancient. This was to be his last stand, but even the glorious sacrifice of a venerable Dreadnought might not be enough to stop the stompa.

Rhodomanus and his brother Fists had been unable to destroy it fifty years before, during the Second War for Armageddon, only managing to delay the inevitable by trapping it within the glacier. And now, fifty years on, what hope was there for him as he stood before the devastatingly powerful war machine?

But still he kept firing, directing blast after blast of his multi-melta at the gun emplacements that bristled from the effigy’s carapace, at the stompa’s armour itself, and its crew, when his spirit-linked targeter could lock onto them.

The stompa loomed before him, blocking his view of the crater and the rest of the horde, the macabre god-machine filling his world. Nothing else mattered now. There was only the ancient and the idol, two relics from another battle for Armageddon, ready to make the final moves of a power play begun five decades before.

Sparkling emerald flame consumed the ork teleporter once more, power relays humming as the device came online again. Rhodomanus’s optical sensors homed in on the roasted remains of the tech-servitor fused to the esoteric device by its last firing. The servitor was dead, so how was it that

the teleporter was powering up to fire at all?

It was only then that Rhodomanus realised that in his face-off with the stompa he had backed himself onto the empty platform and now stood directly beneath the beam emitter.

A nimbus of actinic light formed at the centre of the teleporter, also directly beneath the focusing beam of the vast construction, surrounding him with its suffused essence. Something was being beamed back to the teleporter.

He felt the tingle of it at his very core, in every fibre of his body that was still flesh and blood. And the machine-spirit of his Dreadnought body felt the exhilarating rush of a trillion calculations as the impossible machine read and recorded the position of every atom within his body, the connection of every synapse, the binary pattern of every recollection-code stored within his memory implants. He was beaming out.

Framed by the skeletal structure of the alien device, the stompa seemed to peer down at him with the telescoping sights of its cannon-barrel eyes.

Through his one remaining mortal eye Rhodomanus saw adamantium, steel, ceramite and flesh become first translucent and then transparent. At the same time he saw something else taking shape within the sphere of light with him, becomingly steadily more opaque as it solidified around his departing form.

For the briefest nano-second he and the object shared the same space – his machine-spirit merging with its primitive programmed consciousness. Fifty metres long and weighing a hundred tonnes – the energy build-up already taking place within its plasma reactor perilously close to the point of critical mass and detonation – the torpedo was capable of blowing a hole in the side of an ork kill kroozer with armour plating several metres thick. The venerable’s own machine-spirit continued the countdown to destruction.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

Suffer not the alien to live, he thought.

And then actinic light blinded his optical sensors and the bleak white wastes of the Dead Lands, the collapsing structure of the teleporter and the impotently raging stompa. Everything vanished, melting into black

oblivion, and Brother Rhodomanus was gone.

The battle-barge *Pride of Polux* hung in high orbit above Armageddon's second largest landmass.

All was still within the reclusiam. Captain Obiareus, Commander of the Crimson Fists Third Company, was alone with his thoughts and his strategium. There were not many minutes in the day when he could say that, and he savoured those times when it was the case. But such precious moments made all the difference to his command. They were those times when he could step back, reflect, consider and plan.

He sat, the elbows of his power armour resting on the cuisses of his armoured legs, gauntlets locked together before his face. His lips touched the reliquary that hung from his neck on its golden chain and which he held within his hands as reverentially as he might a newborn. He stared out of the roof-high windows of the reclusiam at the silent void beyond, pondering again his Chapter's gains and losses on the planet below, alone with his thoughts and the stars.

Footsteps disturbed the captain's contemplations, the sound of ceramite ringing from the stone-flagged floor shattering the silence of the reclusiam. Obiareus looked up in annoyance.

Brother Julio approached the strategium, head bowed respectfully.

'What is it?'

'My lord,' Julio began. 'We have received a hail from Marshal Brant of the Black Templars Solemnus Crusade. He wishes to speak with you, my lord.'

'The Templars wish to speak with us?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Regarding what matter?' Obiareus probed further.

'They have news, my lord.' Brother Julio faltered, as if hardly able to believe what he himself was saying.

'Yes? What news?'

'News of Venerable Rhodomanus,' Brother Julio said hesitantly.

'Brother Rhodomanus?' Now it was Obiareus's turn to express his disbelief. 'Brother Rhodomanus lost to us these fifty years past since the Second War fought against the xenos for this world?'

'Yes, my lord,' Julio confirmed, 'but lost no longer. Venerable Rhodomanus has returned.'

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THE THIRD WAR

RACHEL HARRISON

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I breathe in and taste ashes. Ashes and death.

The sun squints out from behind yellow clouds and smog. Acid rain hits my battleplate, hissing softly and curdling the black and bone paintwork. Hundreds of my Mortifactors brothers stand behind me, unmoving statues. Steam and smoke rises from their armour. Before us lies a hive city that reaches up into the sky like a desperate, grasping hand.

The hive is burning.

The distant wailing of hundreds of thousands of human voices carries on the wind. It is near-constant, like background distortion on a vox-channel. Titans move through the smog, illuminated by the fires and the flaring discharge of their weapons. I can feel their tread, even out here.

We stand at the foot of the city walls but we are not alone. Legions of dirty, grey-brown tanks churn the ground and rattle and squeal behind us. Hordes of mortal men in breather masks clutch their lasguns with grim determination. I smell the fear on them despite the stink of the chemical rain.

Inside the city, the enemy burn and ruin and roar.

I take a step forward and I falter, falling to one knee. My chest burns.

A hand on my arm. I look up. It is one of my brothers. He pulls me to my feet without a word.

I do not recognise him.

Inside the city, the Titan-tread rattles my teeth.

The smog is thicker here. It coils around my limbs as if it is sentient. I can no longer see the battle tanks, though I can still hear their engines chugging.

At a crossroads, we meet our foe.

A huddle of thick-necked orks bark and snap at each other beside the smoking hull of a Chimera transport. They club at the access hatches, knocking great ugly dents into the metal.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I start to run and the rhythmic pounding echoes in my ears. My chest burns.

The orks only turn to face me when I am close enough to see every pitted crack in their monstrous faces. I bring my bolter to bear. Three shots tear the first ork to pieces, separating his top and bottom jaws like a flower opening. The next ork in line howls in animal pain, shattered pieces of tooth and bone lacerating its face and neck, blinding it.

I silence its wailing with a clubbing strike from my crozius, caving in its brow. It lands a lucky strike with its blade as it dies, the rusty metal digging deep underneath my chest plate. I try to curse but it is blood that leaves my lips, not words.

I haul myself up onto the top of the transport. The other greenskins are gone. I cannot see my brothers either. Perhaps the smog hides them from me.

I hear a noise behind me and turn.

A huge, rusted claw clamps on to the hull of the transport, bending the metal shell of the tank. A massive black-skinned ork uses the claw to drag its bulk up onto the roof of the tank beside me. The creature is vast, at least twice my height. Strapped to its shoulders are huge pieces of curved metal.

Tank armour. It is wearing tank armour.

I ready my weapons and the ork roars.

The metal claw connects with my chest, knocking the air out of my body in a bloody gasp.

I see ground, sky, ground, sky.

Ground.

I blink heavily. I am lying at the base of a rockcrete wall. Pieces of my fused ribcage grind together as I breathe. My chest burns. I roll onto my back and reach for my weapons but they are gone.

A huge shape blocks the light out. The ork. It plants its foot on my chest, pressing my body into the stinking mud. I can’t breathe.

The claw comes down and closes around my battle-helm. I draw my

combat blade, jamming it into the meat of the ork's thigh. The creature doesn't seem to notice. It just pushes down harder with its foot, splitting the ceramite of my plastron. Something inside my chest bursts under the pressure. Blood washes into my mouth.

The claw tightens around my helm and twists. The seals snap and hiss, and it is torn loose from the collar of my suit. The ork wrenches it free and throws it to one side. I see it land in the dirt, crushed. The acid rain starts to sting my face.

The pressure on my chest eases for a moment as the ork removes its foot. I try to get to my feet.

I manage to get to my knees.

The ork's unarmoured hand closes around my neck, lifting me from the ground.

I stare it in the eyes. Those tiny eyes set deep in its head, burning like the last embers in an untended grate. The ork grunts and barks through a mouthful of yellowing tusks. I think it is laughing.

I spit in its face. In its *eyes*. The acidic saliva eats into the ork's flesh and it roars, enraged. The metal claw wraps around my chest and squeezes.

My lungs burst.

My hearts judder.

My chest *burns*.

I awaken. It is like breaking the surface after swimming up from the aphotic depths of an ocean.

'Gavador,' a voice from beside me says the name. My name.

I blink heavily and breathe deep. I should not be alive. I should…

'Gavador,' the voice repeats.

The lights are bright and my eyes adjust slowly. I am in an apothecarion.

No.

The apothecarion. I am in the main apothecarion aboard the *Basilica Mortis.*

'Gavador, can you hear me?' the voice says again.

I look now and I actually see. Apothecary Hekimar stands beside me. The bright white light reflects glaringly off his armour-plate.

'The vision nearly killed you this time,' He says with a cold smile. 'Both your hearts arrested whilst you dreamt. I have never seen the like.'

I remember. The vision-quest. The battle with the orks. It was a premonition. It was an omen.

‘Armageddon,’ I say. My voice is a rattling gasp. ‘I saw it. We must go to Armageddon.’

Hekimar nods solemnly.

‘You were not the only Chaplain to see Armageddon.’

I sit up, breathless.

‘Who else?’

Hekimar looks at me with another cold smile.

‘All of them.’

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Master of Mankind*, *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He has also written the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the novels *The Talon of Horus* and *Black Legion*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novel *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Censure* and *Red-Marked*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story 'Borne by the Storm', included in the novel *War Storm*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novel *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm* and *Wolf King*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Inquisition novel *The Carrion Throne* and the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, as well as the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*. For Space Marine Battles, he has written the novels *Wrath of Iron* and *War of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

Josh Reynolds is the author of the Horus Heresy Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*, and the audio dramas *Blackshields: The False War* and *Blackshields: The Red Fief*. His Warhammer 40,000 work includes *Lukas the Trickster*, the *Fabius Bile novels Primogenitor* and *Clonelord*, *Deathstorm*, the novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, and the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*. He has written many stories set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novels *Soul Wars*, *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden* and *Nagash: The Undying King*. His tales of the Warhammer old world include *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, and two Gotrek & Felix novels. He lives and works in Sheffield.

Steve Lyons' work in the Warhammer 40,000 universe includes the novellas *Engines of War* and *Angron's Monolith*, the Imperial Guard novels *Ice World* and *Dead Men Walking* – now collected in the omnibus *Honour Imperialis* – and the audio dramas *Waiting Death* and *The Madness Within*. He has also written numerous short stories and is currently working on more tales from the grim darkness of the far future.

Jonathan Green's contributions to the Warhammer 40,000 universe include the Black Templars books *Crusade for Armageddon* and *Conquest of Armageddon* and the novel *Iron Hands*. In the Warhammer World, he wrote *Magestorm* and *The Dead and the*

Damned. He is also the author of numerous short stories and the Path to Victory gamebooks *Herald of Oblivion*, featuring Imperial Fists Space Marines, and *Shadows over Sylvania*. He lives and works in London.

Rachel Harrison is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 short stories ‘Execution’ and ‘A Company of Shadows’, featuring the character Commissar Severina Raine. She has also written the short story ‘Dirty Dealings’ for Necromunda, as well as a number of other Warhammer 40,000 short stories including ‘The Third War’ and ‘Dishonoured’

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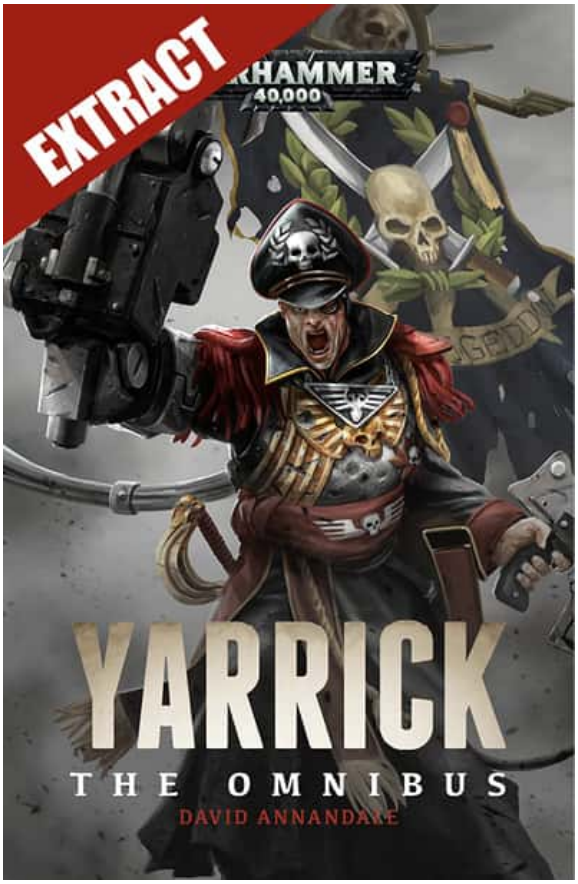
An extract from *Yarrick: The Omnibus*.



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1. YARRICK

I watched the deployment embarkation as if seeing one for the first time. There was a strong element of truth to that impression. During my years as a storm trooper I had taken part in many mobilizations, many invasions, but I had always been in the midst of the troop formations – one cog among thousands of others, marching into the drop-ships. Now, briefly, I stood apart from the great mass of the troops. I was on a balcony overlooking the loading bay of the *Scythe of Terra*. For the first time I saw the full spectacle of a regiment about to enforce the Emperor's will. The perspective drove home the magnificence of the engine of war that was the Imperial Guard. Below me was the 77th Mortisian Infantry Regiment. The sons and daughters of the dying hive world of Aighe Mortis stood at attention in phalanxes of geometric perfection. They were no longer individuals. They were a collective entity, a massive fist as clockwork and unwavering in its precision as the limb of any Titan. I saw and understood how right and proper was the anonymity I had known before. I had been completely replaceable. I was still, only now I was required to understand *why*.

This was what I was learning from my new vantage point, in my new identity, in my new uniform. The peaked cap and the greatcoat with its epaulettes creating an imposing silhouette, the colours of authority and discipline embodied in the dress black and the crimson collar: this apparel obliterated the identity of its wearer as surely as had my storm trooper armour, or the khaki fatigues of the Mortisians. But where the troop uniforms merged the self into a force-multiplying whole, my garb stood out. Visibility was vital to the commissar. He had to be seen in order to inspire

courage and fear. The clothes were the symbols of authority, of righteousness, of discipline. They were what bore the meaning of the rank. The actions that were carried out when they were worn had to be worthy of them, and were crucial to maintaining their power and honour. The actual individual under the cap was irrelevant.

So I thought.

I was not alone on the balcony. I was there with Dominic Seroff. Together we had been the terror of our dorms at the schola progenium. Smiling fate had seen us in the same platoon, inflicting terror of a different sort on the heretic and the xenos. Now, as I answered the calling I had felt for as long as I can remember, Seroff too had donned the black coat. I on the right, Seroff on the left, we flanked a legend. Lord Commissar Simeon Rasp had summoned us to witness the final minutes before embarkation. On a grand podium opposite the hull doors, Colonel Georg Granach held forth to the soldiers of the regiment, praising their faith and zeal, and prophesying martial glory.

‘Tell me what you see,’ Rasp said.

I glanced away from the troops, and caught Seroff looking my way. Each of us was inviting the other to speak first and get it wrong. The set of Seroff’s mouth told me he was willing to let the silence stretch to embarrassing lengths. I knew his canniness. He knew my eagerness. I had already lost. It was simply a matter of recognizing that fact.

Seroff looked too young to be a commissar. He had somehow made it through our dozens of battle zones without picking up a single scar. He still had the face of a joker. With his blond curls struggling to push his cap off his head, I wondered how seriously troopers would take him as a commissar. I sometimes wondered how seriously he took his role himself. The contrast with Rasp bordered on the grotesque. The lord commissar waited, impassive, for one of us to answer. His eyes did not move from the floor of the bay, but I knew he was watching us both. His hair, now invisible under his cap, was a close-cropped and dirty white. His angular features had a youthful strength thanks to juvenat treatments, but they had also been sharpened by long experience. He did have scars. The most noticeable was a harsh ‘V’ that ran the length of his cheekbones, coming to the point just below his nose. It was a souvenir of an encounter with the eldar. The xenos who had branded him had not survived.

I took a breath, bowed to the inevitable, and answered. ‘I see what I did not fully understand before now,’ I said. ‘In the Guard, the individual is irrelevant. It is the mass–’

Rasp raised a finger, cutting me off. ‘No,’ he said. His voice was quiet but drew attention with as much force as if it were drowning out the colonel’s vox-amplified speech. ‘If that were true,’ Rasp said, ‘there would be very little need for commissars.’ He pulled his bolt pistol out of his holster. Holding the barrel in his left hand, he placed the stock in his right, keeping his fingers open. ‘Not one of my fingers is strong enough, on its own, to hold this pistol and fire it.’ He closed his fist, lifted the pistol one-handed. ‘With all of them working as one, I am lethal.’

Seroff frowned. ‘Isn’t that what Yarrick said?’

Rasp shook his head. ‘You are both missing an essential element. If I were to lose even one of my fingers, I could still fire the weapon but my accuracy and my speed would be compromised. Lose the thumb or the forefinger and I will be hard-pressed to do more than simply hold the gun.’ His eyes, a cold blue so pale they were almost white, flicked over each of us in turn, judging whether his instruction was sinking in. ‘Am I making myself clear?’

‘The collective strength is created by that of individuals,’ Seroff said.

‘Ignore the importance of specific positions at your peril,’ I added.

Rasp returned the pistol to his belt. ‘Quite so,’ he said. ‘It falls to us, to *you*, to preserve the health of the whole by ensuring the proper functioning of the part. And should the finger be gangrenous…’

‘Sever it,’ I said, ‘and take its place.’

Rasp gave a single nod. The lesson was over.

We listened to the rest of Granach’s speech. He had moved on from broad considerations of regimental honour to the specifics of the mission. Or at least, he had pretended to do so. What he said was little different from any number of commanding officer exhortations I had heard, back when I had been one of the thousands on the embarkation deck. Granach struck me as working from a script, one he had trotted out many times before. He spoke with energy and enthusiasm, but his delivery was over-rehearsed. The more I watched him, the more I saw a man discharging a difficult but necessary duty, one he would be happy to see over and done.

Rasp grunted. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I hope you’re noting the colonel’s

oratory. I have the greatest respect for his tactical prowess, but he is no rhetorician. What, in your estimation, is the problem here?'

'Too familiar,' I said.

A thin smile from the lord commissar. 'Precisely. How many times have you both heard the same vague thoughts, assembled with very similar words?'

Seroff shrugged. 'Isn't it all an inevitable but necessary ritual?'

A single shake of the head, as precise and emphatic as the one nod earlier. 'Is it necessary that the troops be addressed? Yes. But the address should never be ritualized. Its truth becomes robbed of urgency. It fails to inspire. Have you read the *Legomenon Victoriae* of Lord Commander Solar Macharius?'

I had. Seroff hadn't. He tried to bluff by looking very focused and interested, as if he were comparing a Macharian address to Granach's current effort and would come up with a cogent answer in another few moments.

Rasp wasn't fooled. 'Correct that lacuna, Commissar Seroff. You will see the true art of the military speech. Read but one address and you will be already well launched on a new crusade. When you stand before warriors, you must inspire them.' He made a sweeping arm gesture towards the deck. 'I know, as do you, that too many of those soldiers are, whether they know it themselves or not, politely waiting for Colonel Granach to finish so they can get on with it. That is not how it should be.' He favoured first Seroff and then me with a hard look. 'That is how it must never be when you speak. Your authority will inspire fear in the troops who fall under your eye. This is right and necessary, but it is *not* enough. The mere sight of you must grant them fire. And when they hear you, they must be happy to give up their lives.' He paused. 'At great cost to the enemy, of course.'

'Of course,' I agreed.

Rasp listened to Granach a few moments more, then grimaced. 'Word for word,' he muttered under his breath. 'These generalities are death,' he told us. 'Except in cases of necessary secrecy, tell these loyal servants of the Emperor why they are about to kill and die. Let them know the stakes. Give them a sense of purpose. Tell them why we are here. You heard General Rallam's address to the commanding officers. His style is rather too clipped, but he was precise.

‘Commissar Yarrick. Tell *me* why we are here.’

‘We have come, at the request of Cardinal Wangenheim, to suppress a heretical uprising led by Baron Bartholomew Lom of Mistral.’

A snort. ‘True, but rather bluntly put. If you were speaking to your charges, you would find more of the poetry of war in your soul, I trust. I once heard you when I visited the schola progenium, Yarrick. I know what you are capable of. But yes. We have come to quell the turbulent Baron Lom.’

Rasp looked up, away from the assembly. His gaze drifted to the outer hull doors. He seemed to be staring through them, as if he could see Mistral turning below.

‘Lord commissar?’ Seroff asked.

No answer at first. There was a faint tightening of his jaw, the only sign of an internal debate. Finally, he said, ‘You are political officers. You know this, but I wonder if you have grasped the full implications of that fact. Your duties are to guard against deviation. The realities will mean rather more. Necessity will drive you to swim in murky waters.’

He fell silent. He hadn’t disclosed anything truly revelatory. He had articulated that which was never said, but understood by all but the most naïve. There was something else he was on the verge of saying. I hesitated before speaking, but as the seconds mounted in silence, I realized that the moment was slipping away. I decided to be direct.

No, that’s a lie. I didn’t decide. I have always been direct. That is my special curse. It is also, I know, why I have been seen as a curse myself. That’s a thought to keep me warm at night.

‘Are the waters of Mistral murky?’ I asked.

Rasp made a noise in his throat, a stillborn laugh. ‘So the local expression would have it. It’s been years since I last set foot on its surface. But I would be surprised if matters have changed for the better since then.’

‘They can’t have,’ Seroff said. ‘Otherwise we wouldn’t be here.’

‘True. And yet…’ Rasp frowned. He thought for a moment, and then his expression cleared. He had come down on one side of a hard deliberation, and was now at peace with his conscience. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘this mission appears to be very straightforward – an insurgency that is beyond the abilities of local forces to contain, but that is nevertheless limited in scope. Our rapid triumph is a certain conclusion, and is therefore not to be

trusted. When matters are at their most cut-and-dried is when you must be most wary.'

'On Mistral?' Seroff asked.

'Anywhere,' Rasp answered. 'Everywhere. But today, yes, on Mistral.'

I ran through questions in my mind, examined angles. I applied the lessons of my mentor. Assume the hand of political manoeuvrings, even and especially where none seemed present. What was the context lurking behind the rebellion? Why would Rasp be uneasy? He had been here before. That was an interesting piece of data. What did that tell me, then? A possibility dawned. 'Is Baron Lom known to you?' I asked.

The corner of Rasp's mouth twitched. He was pleased. Not just with his student, I think, but also with the opportunity to speak further. 'I have met him twice, and then only briefly,' the lord commissar said. 'But I was impressed. The family has a storied history of service in the Imperial Guard. I believe that certain off-shoots have even produced some inquisitors.' He had continued to stare at the far wall as he spoke, but now he finally faced us. And there was the hard, unflinching, evaluating gaze. It was perhaps the most visible expression of the qualities that had made him pre-eminent among commissars. Nothing escaped those eyes. Nothing was beyond their judgement. When I was pinned by that gaze, I knew to listen to his next words as though my soul depended on them.

'Heresy has no respect for reputation or family,' he said. 'I have seen it take root in the heart of individuals who had, until that very moment, been so free of taint as to be saints. No one is beyond its reach except the Emperor Himself. No one. So I do not suggest *for a second* that Baron Lom is somehow above suspicion. But…' The finger held up again, emphatic as an enforcer's power maul. '*But*… the fact remains that Lom's profile is not the usual one for a heretic. And the political waters of Mistral are of the very murkiest.' He clasped his hands behind his back. 'So, fellow commissars, my final command before we head into battle – eyes open. Always.'

Down below, Granach had finished his address to the regiment. The phalanxes turned and began to march into the drop-ships. It was time to go.

2. SAULTERN

He never liked the descents. Buckled into his seat, held in place by the impact frame, he was just another egg among a hundred others, waiting to be smashed if the landing went wrong. And every drop felt like it was going wrong. There were no viewing blocks in the passenger hold of the drop-ship, no way to tell when the ground was coming up or what was happening outside. The journey from low orbit to ground was a prolonged violent shaking in a metal box. All of that was bad. The worst, though, was the helplessness. He understood that the immobility was necessary to prevent a broken spine or worse, but his instinctual reaction was to revolt against the perceived imprisonment. For the length of the descent, he had no agency. His life was in the hands of forces beyond his control, beyond even his knowledge, and he wasn't even granted the illusion of having a say in his survival or fall.

Logan Saultern, Captain of Third Company, 77th Mortisian Infantry Regiment, liked this descent even less than the dozen other drops he had taken. That was because he was seated opposite a commissar. The man's name was Yarrick, and the fact that he was young as political officers went was no comfort to Saultern. He had those commissar eyes. If anything, he was worse than the usual watchdog. His stare was direct, unwavering, unblinking, and did not move until he had seen whatever it was he wished to see. Yarrick didn't look at Saultern for long. One glance, not much more than a second, and that was it. Saultern watched the commissar eye every other trooper visible from his seat. Yarrick favoured a number of them with an evaluation at least twice as long as Saultern's.

He was so caught up in parsing what that might mean that, for once, Saultern barely noticed that the drop had begun. He withdrew into a sty of bitter self-loathing. *That's how much I'm worth*, he thought. *A quick oh-it's-you and then we move on*. He had no illusions about his ability to command, just as he had no illusions about how he came to be a captain. The last of the great mercantile families had long since fled the decaying, played-out Aighe Mortis, but the children of some of the more clandestine relationships remained.

Occasionally, a flare-up of paternal guilt or some other sudden excess of sentiment would lead to random acts of largesse and the bestowing of favours. That had been Saultern's luck. Swept up by the last founding, his training had mysteriously been redirected to the officer class. He didn't

even know what faction of old Mortisian money had ties with him. He didn't care. What mattered was that he had no business being an officer. He had survived the streets of Aighe Mortis by being as nondescript as possible, and he resented having that camouflage stripped away. The men he commanded made him uneasy. The sergeants terrified him. One, Katarina Schranker, was a veteran sergeant. Covered in the tattoos and scars of dozens of battlefields, her grey hair shorn to stubble, she made him feel like his actions were being watched by a compact tank. He had muddled through his missions until now, but he had been part of rear-line reserves in minor engagements. This time, he and his company were being sent out in the first wave. Intimations of mortality fluttered in his chest. Yarrick's lack of interest was further confirmation of his approaching demise. *He knows I won't be around long enough to matter*, Saultern thought.

The landing was a violent jar. The captain's teeth slammed together, and he bit through his lip. Blood poured down his chin in a humiliating rivulet. The bow of the drop-ship opened, becoming a ramp the width of the hull, while the impact harnesses retracted. Cursed, kicked and howled at by sergeants, men and women leapt up from their seats, grabbed their packs and pounded down the ramp into the early morning light of Mistral. Yarrick was among them. Saultern had no idea how the commissar had moved so fast. One moment he was sitting there, impassive, then Saultern glanced down to wrestle with unbuckling his straps, and when he looked up Yarrick was gone.

Saultern hurried to catch up. He wasn't the last out of the drop-ship, but was still far enough back from the main body of soldiers for his uniform to feel like a costume, not a mark of rank. Then, as he descended the ramp, he encountered Mistral's weather, and for a few moments all thoughts of shame and inability were swept away.

Mistral's rotation was very rapid. Saultern knew this. He also knew that the planet's days were only eighteen hours long. He hadn't realized what one of the other consequences of the rotation would be. He hadn't counted on the wind. It rushed at him from the west as he left the shelter of the drop-ship. It almost knocked him over. Close to a gale force, it threw him off balance, pushed and kept pushing. Its howl was a mournful white noise. There were very few gusts, just a constant battering, a stealing of breath and of sound. Everything else was muffled. Even the Leman Russ tanks rolling

out of the next ship to the right had lost the intimidating power of their engines' roar. Saultern's vision was reduced, too. He had to squint to keep his eyes from watering. Each step was a struggle to move forwards in a straight line, and not stumble sideways. *How do I command in this?* Saultern thought. *Throne, never mind that. How do I* fight *in this?* It felt as if the wind were blowing through his head, rattling concentration. He clutched his cap, as if to keep what sense he could make inside his skull. He reached the bottom of the ramp and looked around.

The regiment was disembarking on a wide plain that extended south and west to the horizon. Its tall grasses bent and whispered eternal obedience to the wind. To the east, the land rose until it became a mountain chain whose peaks had been weathered into distorted columns and agonized claws. To the north were low, rolling hills. Into those hills was where the regiment was headed. That was where he was supposed to lead.

Waiting at the base of the hills were the locals: small contingents sent by the loyal barons. Altogether, they didn't appear to Saultern to add up to much more than a company. There were enough family liveries and colours to make the Mordian Iron Guard look drab. These men were parade soldiers, Saultern thought. They were nothing but plumage. They looked as ridiculous as he knew he was.

He saw Yarrick standing at the head of his company. For a moment, Saultern thought the commissar had already deemed him unfit and removed him from command. But the commissar was not charging into the hills. He was standing still, waiting. Saultern felt the man's eyes bore into his soul from hundreds of metres away. Still clutching his cap, he ran forward, shoving his way through lines of mustering soldiers, until he reached Yarrick.

'Captain Saultern,' Yarrick said. The greeting was clipped, formal, as iron-spined as the man who spoke. He saluted.

'Commissar.' Saultern returned the salute.

'Are you ready?'

Saultern wasn't sure, at first, that Yarrick had spoken. The words were so soft; how could he have heard them over this wind? But the commissar was watching him, waiting for a response. He was horrified to hear himself answer honestly. 'No.' He waited for the bolt shell that would terminate his command.

Yarrick did not move. His expression, such impassive stone for a young man, did not alter. He spoke again, still quietly, projecting his words over the wind to Saultern's ears alone. 'Are you willing?'

'Yes.' To Saultern's surprise that was the truth.

'Then lead.'

The two words were an absolute imperative. Saultern could no more disobey them than arrest Mistral's rotation. When his full consciousness caught up to his actions, he was marching up the slope of the first hill, his company behind him, Chimeras on either side, the tanks of Colonel Benneger's 110th Armoured Regiment chewing up the terrain ahead. The wind battered him from the left, while a stronger wind, given a shape in cap and coat, stalked at his shoulder and held him to his course.

3. YARRICK

It was easy to despise Captain Saultern. It would have been too easy to dismiss him. I hadn't expected the strength of my office to be needed so soon. Shoring up a quailing officer before the first shot had been fired was a bit much. The first shot could easily have been my own, putting down a coward. I'm not sure what made me pause long enough to think and look clearly. It might have been Saultern's absurdity. I do know that what saved him in the end was his honesty. Whether he intended to speak as he did or not, he did not dissemble, and to speak that one word, *no*, to a commissar, took courage, even if it was of an unconscious kind.

Rasp wanted me to keep my eyes open at all times. To be a good political officer meant having a deep understanding of actions and consequences. So he taught, and so I believed. His views were not shared by all the members of our order. There were plenty whose approach began and ended with merciless disciplinarianism. Rasp, however, was a lord commissar. Achieving that exalted rank meant being more than a blunt instrument. Seroff and I were privileged to receive his wisdom. We were learning that being a commissar meant reading currents.

It meant seeing what was really before me, not what I expected to see.

So Saultern was still drawing breath, and, for the moment, behaving like a captain of the Imperial Guard. Was sparing him wise? I still had my doubts.

He was convinced that he was unfit to lead. If he was correct, was I condemning troopers to a needless death by leaving them in the command of an incompetent? I was trusting my instinct, which was telling me that a man with so few illusions about himself was less likely to act stupidly than an officer with delusions of superiority or, Emperor save us, a belief in his own immortality.

I had made the decision. I would accept the responsibility for it and for its consequences. I would learn from what followed. That was the only way, Rasp said, to fulfil one's duty, to become a commissar in the truest sense possible. Observe and learn. Observe and learn. The mantra spun through my head, a resolution and a comfort.

Observe and learn.

We crested the hill. Beyond it, the land dropped sharply until it was well below the level of the plain. We descended into a valley only a few kilometres wide. The two linked Vales of Lom were an oasis in Mistral's desert of wind. Here, in these deep, sheltered declivities, the topsoil was not blown high into the atmosphere at the first hint of cultivation. Better still, rich nutrients carried on the winds for thousands of kilometres ran into the wall of the Carconne Mountains, and accumulated on the valley slopes. The vineyards had first been planted there twenty centuries ago, and the amasec they produced was the finest in the subsector. It was at least as big a factor in the Lom fortune as the family's industrial holdings.

The wind diminished as we moved lower down, but suddenly became shrill. It keened. Then I realized I wasn't hearing wind. Two of the tanks exploded ahead of me. The grey air was stained with the black teardrops of incoming heavy mortar shells.

My mantra changed.

Fight or die.

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